My parents and me at the Texas State Fair.

Spoken from the Heart

Laura Bush
SCRIBNER
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For the joys of my heart,

my husband, George;

my daughters,

Barbara and Jenna;

my mother;

and the memory of my dad.

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Through the Nursery Glass

My first birthday.

What I remember is the glass. It was a big, solid pane, much bigger than our little

rectangles at home, which sat perched one on top of the other. I can still picture that

window and the way it seemed to float on the wall without any curtains or wood. Beyond

the glass was the nursery, where they kept the babies. I don't remember looking at a baby.

In my mind, there is only the window, although my brother, John Edward Welch, is lying

on the other side of the glass. It is June of 1949 in Midland, Texas, and I am two and a

half years old.

I do not remember if I stood on my tiptoes or if my father held me, smelling as he

often did of strong coffee and unfiltered cigarettes. He would have dressed me himself

that morning in a pretty cotton dress that my grandmother had made. She made almost all

of my clothes, choosing her own cute patterns and fabrics, sewing them on her old treadle

Singer sewing machine, the needle clacking up and down as she pumped the pedal with

her foot. Whatever scraps her scissors had left behind she would take and carefully turn

into matching doll dresses. Then she would bundle them up, a few at a time, and mail

them from El Paso to Midland. Later, when the ranchers' daughters and the oilmen's girls

were riding with their mothers on the train into Dallas to buy their first school dresses,

pink or ruffled, with white lace or pert satin bows, at Neiman Marcus or Young Ages, my

grandmother was still posting her cotton creations for me on the mail train from El Paso.

Although the Western Clinic was less than ten blocks from our little house on

Estes Avenue, with its hint of a front porch and postage stamp yard, where the grass was

continually battling drought and dust, we would have driven there, in my father's Ford.

I was born on November 4, 1946, at the same little Western Clinic, a one-story

building, concrete and cinder block, with rows of decorative thick block glass and thin

windows. It was built over a decade earlier, in the lean years of the 1930s, when Midland

was a town of some 9,000 people. But by 1949, Midland was closing in on 22,000

people, and Western Clinic was still all there was. It had a scant thirty-six beds. Patients

were simply patched up and moved on. There was a long waiting list for surgeries. The

clinic could not afford to let anyone dawdle; as soon as they were able, perhaps even

before, patients went home. Dr. Britt, who ran the clinic, had been brought in to practice

in Midland by the oil companies. He birthed babies, treated sick toddlers, set broken

bones, and watched hearts fail. Western Clinic didn't have a blood bank until 1949. Its Xrays were packed up and sent by commercial bus to a radiologist in Fort Worth. The drive

alone was more than six hours. And once that bus had left, Dr. Britt could only wait until

the next one was ready to depart from the depot. The city also kept a small Cessna-style

plane parked alongside the grassy landing strip at the airport to fly patients in and out and

to ferry pathology samples over to a doctor in San Angelo. When the brand-new, $1.4

million Midland Memorial Hospital opened, in 1950, the X-rays were still bussed and the

surgery samples still flown.

But this was 1949. There was barely an obstetrical or surgical unit inside Western

Clinic by the end of that year. My parents would have known this. My father's brother,

Mark, was a doctor in Dallas. But we lived in Midland, and there was no way to move a

fragile baby, born unexpectedly two months too soon.

My father had always wanted a son. In February of 1944, when he and my mother

had been married for a few weeks, he wrote her a letter from a training base in North

Carolina. A thirty-one-year-old GI, he was waiting there to be shipped to England. On

thin airmail paper, in his tall, narrow, and meticulous script, Harold Welch wrote to his

new bride, Jenna, who was not yet twenty-five, "Honey, what do you want, a little boy or

a little girl? What you want, I want, it makes no difference to me, but I'd kind of like to

have a little boy, would you?"

I see them now in an old photograph, my grandfather Hal Hawkins, looking hot,

uncomfortable, and a bit dour in his jacket and tie, his belly straining against the buttons

of his white shirt, his hair refusing to stay slicked back and instead slipping down over

his forehead. On the other side of the picture is my father, a head taller, hair neatly

cropped, in his dress uniform, grinning and handsome, "so handsome," as my mother

says, "with the most beautiful blue eyes." And between them is my mother, her arms

through the arms of the men beside her, her head flung back in laughter, her whole face

alive with a look of pure joy. Harold and Jenna waited two years for each other. My

father shipped home in January of 1946. Two years beyond their vows, they were still

newlyweds.

My mother was an only child, and when I was growing up, she would say with a

wink in her quick, witty West Texas way that she would have been "insulted" if her

parents had had more children. But that is only part of the story, the way when you dig

down through the dry West Texas flatlands you discover the fossilized remnants of shells

and underwater life, what remains of the ancient, vanished Permian sea.

Only when I was much older did I learn that my grandmother had lost her own

babies, two babies, my mother thinks, both of whom were born too soon and died. But

she never truly knew because no one spoke of it. You might talk about the wind and the

weather, but troubles you swallowed deep down inside. My mother's own pregnancy with

me had been hard. She did as the doctors told her and spent most of it in bed. This time

she had gone to bed too, but the baby still came early, gasping, with no high-tech

incubator to warm him, no pediatric IV line to put in his tiny arm, nothing but swaddling

blankets and a few sips of formula from a glass bottle or given with an eyedropper, the

way one feeds an injured baby bird.

He would never know the sting of a baseball hitting a leather mitt, or ride his bike

up to the edge of Big Spring Street, where the road turned abruptly from pavement to

flattened dust, or get his first tooth or report card or walk into church in shiny, stiff shoes.

He would never come home from the Western Clinic. He would never have his

intended name. My parents had planned on naming him Hal, after both my father and my

grandfather. But no one wanted to bury Hal Welch, three days old. So his official name

was John Edward. Hal or Harold was a name they would save for another boy.

John Edward lived only for those few days and then he died. He had a birth

certificate, but I never heard him spoken of as a live birth. A "late miscarriage" was how

it was euphemistically put. Newnie Ellis, the city undertaker, tended to his lifeless body.

He was buried in a tiny box coffin in an unmarked grave alongside other Midland babies

who had, over the years and decades, come ever so briefly into the world and then passed

on.

There were two more lost babies, a girl, Sarah Elizabeth, when I was eight and

another boy when I was thirteen. The doctors called them late miscarriages too. I

remember when I was eight that my mother had a blue and white polka dot maternity

dress and I had a little navy blue and white polka dot dress. They weren't really matching,

but they were the same polka dot, and I loved that we almost matched when we wore

them. But by midsummer, her dress and the baby, who would have been my sister, were

gone.

I don't know if my mother cried for these babies when I was out playing in the

yard, or rapping on the door of our back-door neighbors over the fence, or darting with

the other kids between the gangly, dark limbs and feathery, green leaves of the mesquite

bushes that grew over the vacant lot down the street. I don't know if the tears came when

she smoothed sheets in the linen closet or hung wash on the clothesline to grow stiff and

dry in the hot Midland wind. Or if she trained her eyes to look away whenever she caught

sight of a baby carriage or glimpsed a big, boisterous family being herded into a woodpaneled station wagon. In those times, in West Texas, in the 1950s, we did not talk about

those things.

The mother I knew laughed and loved. But there remained a corner of her heart

that longed for those vanished babies, a corner that dreamed of a big family of her own.

Now, at ninety, when she cannot recall someone she met the day before, she remembers

those babies. She sits in her green chair in her plain Midland living room and says, "We

would have had two boys and two girls if they had all lived. It would have been quite a

family, wouldn't it? I sure wish one of those little boys could have lived at least, because

my husband wanted a boy so bad."

But even back when nothing was said, I knew how much both my parents wanted

those other children. I wanted them too. I remember as a small girl looking up at the

darkening night sky, waiting for the stars to pop out one by one. I would watch for that

first star, for its faint glow, because then I could make my wish. And my wish on a star

any time that I wished on a star was that I would have brothers and sisters.

But year after year, the sound of feet darting down the sidewalk, and up over the

front porch, and through the screen door was always mine and mine alone.

Dreams and Dust

On the porch in Canutillo with our dog Bully. Grammee laid the orange brick by

hand.

When my dad was fighting in Europe in the war, he made a bargain with God. He

promised God that if he got home alive, he'd never own another gun. And he never did.

There was never any kind of a gun in our house, although most boys in Midland by the

time they were fourteen could knock off a row of cans with a .22. My father did not go

hunting for dove or quail or geese or shoot for sport, like a lot of other Texans do. He

drank and he gambled, he bet on football games. He played cards and rolled dice. But he

never had a gun. Ever.

He and his friends were passionate gamblers, especially on football. They used to

meet on Sunday afternoons at Johnny's Bar-B-Q on Big Spring Street, right at the edge of

downtown Midland, when the tables were empty and the restaurant was closed to huddle

over pro games. They bet on pro games, on college games, even on the high school

games that packed the stadium in Midland every Friday night. They played cards,

especially gin rummy, rolled dice, and a few of them, including Daddy, occasionally

packed up and flew to Vegas. Once, I came home from college with a boy I wanted my

parents to meet, and my dad was squatting down on the kitchen floor, shooting craps with

his buddies, the dice skidding across the flat tile and bouncing against the cabinets. The

lot of them barely looked up. I was mortified, but I think my college boy loved it.

The gambling part was a West Texas thing. People who live in this place where

the desert meets the tip of the plains, where the soil fractures and cracks and blows up

against you with the wind, are risk takers, and my dad had grown up in the heart of West

Texas, in Lubbock, which is about 120 miles or two hours north of Midland. My mother

told me that he had learned to shoot craps in the basement of Lubbock High when he was

sixteen or seventeen. He shot a lot of craps in the Army in World War II. But unlike some

of the men in Midland, and a few women too, there was never, ever an occasion when he

gambled what he didn't have, or if he did, I certainly never knew of it. We never wanted

because of his gambling.

My dad always considered himself lucky, and he was. He carried himself with a

confidence that made it impossible to believe he could lose. Even his meeting my mother

was luck. Or so the story went. She spotted him on the street in El Paso when she was

looking out a second-floor window of the Popular Dry Goods Company, where she

worked in the advertising department. Of course, it helped that one of her friends in the

department was married to a man who knew Harold Welch. She remembers her friend

saying, "Look, there's Hal," which was what they called him then. But the fact is that my

mom went over and looked out the window at that exact moment, and there he was.

They had their first date at the Tivoli nightclub in Ciudad Ju'rez, directly across

the border from El Paso. My mother remembers how everyone parked in El Paso and

then, all dressed up, paid six cents to walk across the footbridge into Mexico. Ju'rez was a

glamorous place. When I was little and we went to visit my grandparents, I remember

Mother and Daddy getting ready to go over into Ju'rez for the evening, Mother in a big

circle dress, Daddy fussing with the knot on his tie to get it just so. I begged to go with

them.

The first club, right at the base of the bridge, was the Tivoli, and then a little

farther down was another place, called Lobby Number Two, and other clubs fanned out

from that. The "braver people" ventured farther out into the city, where at one time there

was a jockey club and bullfights staged for the Americans, but my mother says that she

and Harold never did any of that. The clubs had exotic--exotic at least for West Texas-floor shows and orchestras for dancing, and that first night over

in Ju'rez, my mother and

father ordered Boquilla black bass for dinner. The next morning, a little item ran in the

gossip column of the El Paso paper noting that "Jenna Hawkins had been seen dancing

with a handsome stranger at the Tivoli."

More than sixty-five years later, my mother still claims that she didn't want to be

written up in the newspaper. But the Popular Dry Goods Company was the biggest

advertiser in the local paper, and Jenna Hawkins worked in the advertising department.

And making the news didn't seem to deter Harold Welch.

My parents started dating, and they were smitten fast. It was wartime. The

Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, and the United States was also at war with the

Germans. My father was nearly thirty years old, but he enlisted. His assignment was an

antiaircraft brigade attached to the 104th Infantry Division, known as the Timberwolves.

His unit trained in Florida, Louisiana, and outside of El Paso at Fort Bliss, the Army's

massive military installation in the West. When he was on leave, he courted my mother.

Once she invited him on a picnic up in the El Paso foothills. She carefully packed a

basket and a blanket, but Daddy, who was spending his days mired in the dirt of basic

training, declined to eat on the ground. They balanced their plates on their laps and ate

sitting inside the car with the windows rolled down.

My father was seven years older than my mother, but both of them had left school

after two years of college to make their own way. In Daddy's case, it was because his

own father had died and he needed to support his mother. My father's parents, Mark and

Lula Lane Welch, were truly Victorians, born in 1870, five years after the Civil War had

ended and while Queen Victoria was still on the throne. My grandmother even had a

biography of Queen Victoria with a big oval picture on the cover and heavy embossing.

My paternal grandparents were both from Arkansas, but they met in Ada, Oklahoma, and

married when they were forty years old. My uncle Mark was born when they were fortyone and Daddy when they were forty-two. They moved to Fort Worth for a while and

then ended up in Lubbock, where my grandfather built homes. He was, I think, a jack-ofall-trades, a carpenter who could put up a frame, lay pipe, shingle a roof, and run some

rudimentary wires as well. I never knew him. My mother never met him either. By the

time my parents met, only my grandmother was left. I remember her as a big, sturdy, but

very elderly woman with heavy, black lace-up shoes. For years she had belonged to the

Methodist Church and the Temperance Society, which apparently did nothing to stop her

son from driving over to the county line to buy his liquor at Pinkie's package store.

Midland was a dry county back then, so people simply drove out along the highway to

the next county to buy their alcohol. When Grandma Welch came to visit, Daddy would

still drink, but out of deference to his mother, he poured his bourbon into a Coca-Cola

bottle.

When I was little, we drove to Lubbock every other weekend to visit my

grandmother so that Daddy could check on her, make sure her house was tended to and

her bills were paid. She came to our house for Thanksgiving and Christmas. My parents

would go up and get her, and she would bring a bag of her pickled peaches that she put

up each summer in heavy glass jars. Each Christmas she would make her famous coconut

cake. Santa would leave a big, fresh coconut in my stocking, and then Daddy, with great

ceremony, would crack the coconut with a hammer. My grandmother carefully drained

the clear, sweet milk and grated the coconut meat with a hard box grater, which if you

weren't careful, would cut your fingers raw. Then she sprinkled the tender curls over the

frosting like a fine, white snow. She would spend Christmas Day making the cake for

Christmas dinner. I'm not sure if she had a recipe or if she merely mixed the proportions

in her mind, but every bite was delicious.

The Christmas after I turned eight, she carefully wrapped two pieces of jewelry, a

pretty gold bracelet and a gold pin that my grandfather had given her, and put them under

the Christmas tree for me. She sent my little cousin Mary Mark two other pieces of

jewelry, including her opal ring. Those were the only four pieces of jewelry she owned.

She must have known that this was going to be her last Christmas. She died right after

that. My mother was with her. When Grandma Welch was sick and needed tending, it

was my mother who drove to Lubbock to look after her. I was asleep in my parents' bed

when the phone rang deep in the night. Daddy woke me and said simply, "Your

grandmother died." That was all. My grandmother, his mother, was eighty-four.

Afterward, Mother discovered that Grandma Welch had taken her few nice

things--a couple of cut glass vases, platters, a sugar bowl--and had carefully marked each

possession with a strip of masking tape on the bottom, writing "Jenna" or "Catherine,"

and dividing what little she had between her two daughters-in-law.

My parents were married in a chapel at Fort Bliss in January of 1944, right before

Daddy was to be shipped off to Europe. He wore his Army dress uniform. Mother

followed him briefly to his next base, in Alexandria, Louisiana, but within a week my

father was sent east. A hasty good-bye and he was gone. Whirlwind romances with GIs

were common back then, but this wedding was no whim for my mother and certainly not

for my father. One of his first letters to his new bride before he boarded the ship for

England was a detailed accounting of their finances--he began by telling her that he didn't

want her to be worried about money and proceeded to explain how much they had if

Jenna ever needed to turn in their war bonds for cash.

With nothing to do except wait, Mother went back to El Paso and the Popular Dry

Goods advertising department, got a roommate, and hung on every letter. One weekend,

Mother and another of her married friends took turns snapping photos of each other

immersed in fluffy bubble baths inside an old-fashioned claw-foot tub, flashing Kewpie

doll smiles, and mailed the pictures over to their husbands. Daddy carried Mother's photo

across northern Europe. He wrote to her from France, from Belgium, from Aachen, the

ancient medieval town on the German border where Emperor Charlemagne once lived. It

was the first German city to be captured by the Americans. His battalion, the 555th, was

an antiaircraft battalion. My dad was a master gunner. His primary mission was to keep

the unit's gun batteries in working order and to train new gunners, who arrived wide-eyed

and green. He drew maps for the soldiers, and when U.S. forces entered Germany's fourth

largest city, Cologne, under a hail of bullets, it would have been the guns under Daddy's

command firing. After Germany surrendered, Daddy stayed on in Europe because the

plan was that the troops would then be shipped over to Japan. By the time he was

released to go home, it was nearly December of 1945, and the seas were too stormy to

cross. He wrote to Mother from Paris and Dieppe on thin sheets of USO airmail paper. In

one letter, he told her that he didn't like to go to a club and have too many beers with his

friends, "because then I get to missing you so much that I can't stand it."

He finally arrived home in January of 1946. Along with his meager gear, he

carried with him eight tiny two-by-three-inch photos from Nordhausen, Germany, the site

of the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp. Mother kept them along with some letters in

an old latch-top cigar box. As a child, I used to take them out one by one and examine

them, holding them up to the light to study the tiny images frozen in time by the camera's

lens, trying to decipher them. They were pictures of row upon row of bodies of the dead,

some bloated, some so skeletal that they were little more than bones with the last

remnants of skin stretched over them, stark white, sunken torsos in which you could

count every rib. There were three separate rows of bodies, some naked, some still

wearing the rough striped pants and shirts that the Nazis had forced upon them. A few

were covered, looking like hastily wrapped mummies in half decay. The rows of human

beings stretched out beyond the buildings. My dad had written on the back of one of the

photos how the lines of corpses continued well beyond "the second white building." On

another photo, showing the grotesque contorted final death grips of naked men, he wrote,

after a long explanation, "Tear it up if you wish." But no one ever could, ever did, ever

wanted to. He had photos too of a baby and a small child alongside, the child's arm

reaching out in one last, futile effort to cover and to comfort the baby. Beside them are

the bare legs of a horribly shrunken young man. Starvation had consumed his legs to the

point of nothingness. In one last photo, the bodies seem to stretch as far as the eye or

camera could see. There were, I now know, about five thousand of them.

Daddy's overall unit, the 104th, the Timberwolves, had liberated Nordhausen. His

battalion had fought its way into the heavily fortified German town. He was among the

early wave of troops to enter the camp, sent to render aid and to witness what had

happened at Mittelbau-Dora. In the photos, you can see clusters of GIs, their feet in the

same dirty, scarred combat boots that most of them had worn since Normandy, standing

at silent attention beside the field of corpses. Barely one thousand prisoners were alive

when they arrived. A plea had gone out for every Army medic in the region to come to

the camp to treat anyone who might have survived. Many of the living were hiding

among the dead or were too weak even to roll away from those who had died next to

them. They lay amid disease and human waste, sometimes covered with dust from a

bombing. Three or four living men had spent almost a week trapped under decaying

bodies in a bomb crater. Some of the newly freed tried with their last remaining strength

to salute their liberators. The American GIs dropped their heads into their hands and

wept.

My father carried these photos home, most of them taken by one of his unit

buddies. He wrote on the back of one small rectangle that he thought the photo would

look different, but the camera lens had been too small to capture the enormity of the

scene. Yet Daddy did not talk about Nordhausen. Once every year or two, when the three

of us would open the box of photos, he could not bring himself to say a single word. Not

long after he returned, Daddy told my mother that while inside the camp he had come

upon an American Army nurse wielding a shovel in her hand. Before her stood a group of

captured German Army officers. She thrust the shovel toward one man and said, "Dig."

He pulled himself up straight and said, "No, I am an officer," and she lifted the shovel,

whacked him across the bottom, and again said, "Dig." The officer took the shovel and

started to dig. Each scoop of earth widened the space to bury the dead.

I was born in November, just over nine months after Daddy returned home, and to

me, growing up, the war was like ancient history, but to him, it must have been very fresh

and raw.

My dad came home to El Paso, but my parents didn't stay there long. Before the

war, my father had worked for Universal CIT Credit Corporation, a loan company that,

among other things, sold auto financing to people who bought cars. Today banks and car

manufacturers handle auto financing, but in those postwar years people primarily applied

to Universal CIT or another company like it. My father had started out in the Amarillo

office and then moved to El Paso to be the district manager, but during the war one of his

good friends had been promoted to run the El Paso office. Daddy had no wish to take

away his job. The company offered Daddy several other posts, and he picked district

manager for Midland. To sweeten the deal, CIT threw in a company car for him to drive.

Across the United States in 1946, there were thousands of towns like Midland and

hundreds of thousands of men like my father. Midland became a boomtown because of

the oil, but there are towns all over the country--auto towns in Michigan, steel towns in

Pennsylvania or Ohio, textile towns in the Carolinas, other industry towns in other states-where veterans came back and settled to live their lives and make their homes. They put

the war behind them, went to work, and built the economy. As kids, we knew small parts

of their stories. We heard the adults talk in hushed sentences about neighborhood women

whose first husbands had died in the war and who were now married to someone else. I

had a couple of friends whose dads had been killed overseas, so they no longer had their

dad, they had whomever their mother married next. That was the man who raised them,

and most kids called him "Dad." Their dads from the war were gone. Many of my

parents' best friends had war stories. Johnny Hackney, who owned Johnny's Bar-B-Q, had

fought in the Pacific. Charlie White, who started out renting the house behind Mother and

Daddy's, had contracted tuberculosis in a training camp during the war. Instead of going

overseas, he was shipped to a sanitarium and his first wife left him. He met his second

wife, Mary, when he came to Midland to work as an accountant for the Shell Oil

Company.

There were families like the Hackneys or the Whites on almost every block, yet

most people rarely mentioned the war. Midland had American Legion posts and Veterans

of Foreign Wars posts, but they blended in with the Kiwanis clubs and the Elks. The

adults I knew did not sit around trading stories of the war, of buddies who had been shot,

friends who never came home, of men blown to bits by the side of the road, of the nights

they were afraid to go to sleep because they might freeze to death in the bitter snows and

cold, or of the emaciated Jews in the camps, many hiding among corpses in their rough,

striped clothes, and the overwhelming stench of human dead. Only later would I learn

that those were the things so many of them had seen.

Instead, they put the war years behind them and looked forward. I think too that

my father seldom spoke of those years because he wanted to shield me. He didn't want

me to know, and didn't want to admit to himself, how horrible man could be. He could

manage the horrors if he did not examine them, did not dwell on them, if he did not lift

the lid of that cigar box too many times to recall what lay within. In Midland, where the

sky arced over us in one enormous dome of blistering blue and where people doggedly

imported acres of elm seedlings and chinaberry trees to plant the green ribbons of shade

that lined their streets at the edge of the desert, we were quite literally an ocean and

almost a continent removed. All those years, though, Daddy kept those photos tucked

away. He might not wish to remember, but neither would he ever allow himself to forget.

In November of 2002, I went to a luncheon in Prague during one of the NATO

summits, and I was seated next to a Czech Holocaust survivor. Over the china plates and

clinking crystal, with jacketed waiters hovering near our half-eaten meals, we started

talking, and I told him that my father had helped to liberate one of the camps but that he

had never actually talked about it. And this man, Arno Lustig, paused and looked at me

and said, "Well, I was in one of the camps, and I never talked about it to my kids either. I

never told them about it." Like my father, he added, he had wanted to shelter his own

children from what he had seen and from all that he knew.

The El Paso that my parents left was a city of over one hundred thousand people.

It had tall brick, quarried stone skyscrapers and crowded downtown blocks. The National

Bank of El Paso building covered a full city corner and climbed seven stories into the

sky. Chubby streetcars clanged up and down the avenues. By comparison, Midland was a

sleepy backwater, a cattle drive and railway town bent on growing beyond itself. My

father saw something in it and bet on Midland. I don't know if he had heard about the oil

strikes when he picked Midland or if he simply wanted to be closer to his mother, in

Lubbock. Once my father chose Midland, there was no turning back. However, Harold

and Jenna Welch didn't stay put. They had lived in three homes before the first one that I

remember, on Estes Avenue. Like all Midland houses, it was a low one-story. Land was

abundant, and the swirling desert winds and the tornadoes that periodically threatened to

rip past made going up impractical. If you were wealthier, you just had a longer house.

Their first home was a room at the Crawford Hotel. Almost everyone who moved

to Midland moved into the Crawford or the slightly fancier Scharbauer Hotel, which had

been built by one of the area's early ranching families. The Scharbauer's lobby was where

cowboys and roughnecks and geologists tramped in and out looking for jobs and where

oil landmen tried to corral ranchers into leasing them the mineral rights to their grazing

acres in the hope of striking black gold. My mother was already pregnant when they

arrived, and Daddy quickly found a little house on North Loraine, right at the edge of

downtown, and put down a deposit. The owner had left behind some furniture and a

puppy from a new litter. They named the dog Bully because he was the bully of the lot,

and Bully lasted longer than the house. By the time I was two, we had moved over to a

house on Estes Avenue. We would live in almost every house on that block before I

turned seven.

My father's office was only a few blocks away, and he drove his company car to

work each morning. Mother walked to the grocery or into town, although, in 1946,

Midland didn't have much of a downtown. The city's first real skyscraper, finished in

1929 by the former Montana senator T. S. Hogan, had been promptly dubbed Hogan's

Folly. It was a towering creation of glass windows and intricately carved sandstone, with

a top that looked like the points in a king's crown. When the building opened, the town

celebrated for a week with barbecues, rodeos, concerts, fireworks, speeches, aerial acts,

and a formal dance with an orchestra in the Crystal Ballroom at the Scharbauer Hotel.

Within five years, barely 10 percent of the offices had been leased, and the building was

used mostly to store grain and hay, one of the most expensive and ornate silos ever built.

My father had the same job that he'd had before the war, but now his territory ran

east and south and west, spanning more than one hundred miles in each direction. From

Midland, it stretched east to Abilene, south to San Angelo and Fort Stockton, and west to

Pecos and Monahans. And it covered a swath of small towns in between, towns with

names like Notrees, Texon, and Iraan. Daddy regularly got behind the wheel and made

the three-, four-, and five-hour drives to call on car dealers or customers in the region. He

knew every dealer in every small town. Occasionally, he took me with him, my legs

growing hot and prickly from the heat that rose in glistening waves from the road.

Mostly, though, he went alone, and I would cry when his car pulled away from the curb.

Today, West Texas salesmen still ply the same routes, this time selling medical devices

and high-tech equipment across that vast triangle of land.

My mother stayed home and waged her own constant battle with the land right

outside our door. Midland sits at the bottom of the High Plains, nearly three thousand feet

above sea level. When the first settlers drove their wagons across it, they found a rich

plateau of shimmering grasslands; "higher than a horse" is how some of them described

the grass. Buffalo grazed along its wide stretches and wallowed in its dips, where the

hard, fast rains would collect and swell into muddy bottoms. On the grasslands, the

Comanche Indians chased the buffalo and then battled the settlers. But the settlers kept

coming. Train tracks were laid. The new arrivals drove in cattle from the east and set up

ranching. And then they plowed the ground. The land was plowed all the way from

Minnesota to Texas. And then the drought came. Without rain, nothing would grow in the

soil, and when the winds raced out of Canada and down through the plains, the soil blew,

acres and acres of topsoil, more soil in one single storm back in the 1930s than was dug

out of the entire Panama Canal, until there was nothing left except the hard, dry land

underneath.

Once the soil was gone and the ground was thoroughly razed, the wind would

blow clouds of sand and dust. We thought Midland had to be the worst place for sand in

all of Texas because it sat at the bottom of this wind range. The land to the north, running

up to Lubbock, had been turned into miles and miles of dry-land cotton farming. But for

seven years, even what was called the "dry land" got no rain. In the 1950s, Texas suffered

its worst drought in history, worse than the Dust Bowl. Not even a trace of rain fell in

Lubbock for the entire twelve months of 1952. All those years, acres of rough, reddish

sand would blow straight down into Midland, riding in thick swirls on the wind.

People latched their windows tight, not to keep out the heat or the desert cold in

the winter, but to hold back the billowing sand. The sand covered our clothes drying on

the line; sometimes they were hardly clean by the time Mother brought them in. My

mother spent her days with a broom and a wet rag, wiping up the reddish grit that snuck

in under the sills or attached itself to your feet or clothes and lodged deep in your hair or

skin whenever the wind blew. And it seemed as if the wind was constantly blowing.

There were sandstorms too, where the sand raced in so thick you couldn't see down the

block or over to the next car. I remember the sand stinging my legs like a layer of acrid

skin and its gritty taste in my mouth, peppering my teeth and tongue. When it blew, you

scrunched up your eyes and stayed indoors. Only giant tumbleweeds roamed the streets

with the wind. They traveled on the gusts until they butted up against something hard that

the wind couldn't topple over. We'd find tumbleweeds wedged under cars or landing

smack against front doors; one of the most popular pictures of Midland from the early

1950s is of a woman standing in front of a nice ranch house blocked up to the roof with

tumbleweeds.

At Christmas, people gathered up the tumbleweeds, tied them together in threes,

and sprayed them with white flocking to make desert snowmen for their lawns. Some

even added jaunty hats or scarves, their versions of Frosty of the Wild West.

In West Texas, the wind and the sand were things you lived with. If you were

born there, you never knew anything else. But if you moved there, it must have seemed

sometimes to be a land forsaken. Cowboys who came out to work the Midland range in

the late 1800s recalled that many days in the winter they did not hear a sound except for

their own footsteps and the moan of the wind. I remember finding a Texas book from the

1920s called *The Wind* by a writer named Dorothy Scarborough. In it, a woman who has

moved to West Texas ranchland eventually goes mad from listening to the wind's

constant howl and drone.

But it wasn't just the wind. There was an underlying sense of hardship, a sense

that the land could quickly turn unforgiving. One of the earliest stagecoach riders, in the

1850s, recalled passing through the grasslands and seeing a vast expanse of the remains

of animals and men. "For miles and miles," he wrote, "these bones strew the plain." They

were the bones of would-be prospectors who had attempted to cut through Texas to reach

the burgeoning California goldfields. Later, in the 1870s, when the Indians battled the

buffalo hunters, who had come to shoot the herds for money and sport, they would not

simply kill them. The far crueler punishment was to take all the hunters' supplies and

leave them to wander the plains, until they collapsed and died of thirst or starvation.

The first family to live in what would become Midland resided in a dugout: they

dug a hole in the ground big enough for a room and strung a tent across for a roof. They

burned mesquite roots for heat. Their daughter had no dolls; she tied strings to sticks to

build a corral, collected rocks to serve as sheep, and played at ranching. One of Midland's

oldest ranching families, the Cowdens, had a cow fall through the roof into their dugout

room and land on a bed. They had to dig up their home to get the cow out.

By the time I was born in Midland, in the mid-1940s, not all of the local ranchers

lived on their ranchlands. Many whose properties encircled the town like a giant, grassy

ring, starting at the very edge where the streets dead-ended into dust, had already moved

their families into houses inside Midland, mostly for the schools. Each morning, the dads

would hop in their cars and head out to their ranches just like other fathers heading into

the office. Only the cowboys stayed out on the range full-time to work the cattle and keep

up the land. But Midland itself was barely two generations removed from the raw, hard

days of the frontier. My grandmother Welch had been eleven when Midland (it was

called Midway back then, because it stood exactly midway between Fort Worth and El

Paso on the railroad line) got its first official building, an old railroad mail car that was

shunted onto a siding to make a post office. Our own street, Estes Avenue, was named for

a cattleman who had boldly driven his herd out onto the drought-scorched plains in 1886.

And living in town did not silence the wind.

It helped to be fearless if you lived in Midland. It wasn't so much an insular world

as an isolated one. Aside from neighboring Odessa, any town of consequence was at least

a two-hour drive away. The city fathers like to call Midland "the Capital City of the Great

Permian Basin Empire," and they put out a huge write-up on the town, detailing

everything down to the neon lights at Agnes's Drive-In. Still, whatever human empire

there was, was sparse. What Midland had by the early 1950s were oil storage tanks and

junctions of vast pipelines that carried petroleum and natural gas miles away to more

populous areas. Sometimes there would be fires at the storage tanks, explosions followed

by big, rushing plumes of flame that turned the sky a smoky red. The incinerating heat

would pour into the already scorched air and sky.

Midland called itself a city although it remained very much a small town. There

was still a blacksmith shop right at the edge of Main Street, its weathered wood siding

emblazoned with the cattle brands of all the local ranches. Whenever the smithy designed

a new brand, its mark was burned into a fresh section of dry wood.

Midland was so small that Mother and Daddy allowed Bully, our rather daring

dog, who had come with the house on North Loraine, to trot down the sidewalks alone

every afternoon. At three o'clock, Bully would walk to Daddy's office, and one of the

men who worked for Daddy would buy Bully an ice cream cone, which he would hold as

Bully proceeded to lick with his bright pink tongue until all the ice cream was gone.

Bully also had a habit of following my mother to Anthony's on Main Street. Bully would

set off behind her, and she would ignore him. Once they reached the store, Mother would

walk inside while Bully sat by the front door waiting until another customer came along

to let him in.

There were a lot of things about Anthony's that Bully liked, but he was

particularly fond of the pneumatic tubes, which the checkers used to deposit cash and

checks and then sent them flying with the push of a button to the cashier who sat high up

on the mezzanine. Bully would hear those tubes take off, and he would take off too,

chasing the tubes through the store. And Mother would pretend that she didn't know him.

He was, she maintained, my father's dog, and everyone agreed that my father was a man

who never met a dog that he didn't like.

Bully was a wire-haired terrier mix, and he was quite simply incorrigible. He once

bit a passerby on the seat of his pants. The man had kicked Bully's best friend, Happy, a

yappy little dog who lived next door. Bully raced up behind the man and bit him.

Incensed, the man banged on our door and promptly turned around to show Mother his

backside, hollering, "Look what your dog did."

Bully often ended up in the pound, which in Midland was a bleak fenced-in pen

by a little shack, and each time Daddy would go to pick him up. Once when Daddy

arrived, the gate was already open and all the dogs had bolted out except for one bitch,

who was in heat and was locked up in her own little pen, and Bully, who sat waiting for

her outside. The dogcatcher blamed Bully for opening the gate.

Eventually, Bully was sent to live with my grandparents in the upper valley of the

Rio Grande above El Paso, where he could have more space to roam. They drove him to

Midland whenever they came to visit, and we saw him anytime we went to El Paso. The

moment he caught sight of my father, Bully would cry and jump on Daddy, because he

never forgot him. But Bully was only the first of our many colorful pets--dogs, cats, a

box turtle, a parakeet who lived on the back porch, and horny toads out in the garden,

which Mother would gently coax into the palm of her hand. We laughed over the antics

of our animals, and they were our beloved companions. We were warmed by their

unconditional love. I played with the dogs and dressed my cat in doll clothes. Time and

again, our animals found us, arriving as if by canine or feline navigation at our front door.

After Bully came Rusty, a cocker spaniel who was particularly close to my

mother and was tragically run over on Big Spring Street. Then came sweet Roman,

named because he roamed up to the house one day. Roman stayed with us for a few years

and then roamed off again. In his lifetime, my father bought only one dog, Duke, a fullblooded boxer with papers, but Duke didn't last. He was a hyper barker who grew too big

for our small backyard. Daddy finally sold him to another family in Midland. But for

several years, he drove up and down the alley next to Duke's new home to make sure

Duke was being treated well. After Duke came Freckles and then Bo, a beagle mix, who

was remarkably dumb and was also dispatched to live out the remainder of his days in El

Paso. Our last dog, Marty, came to us when I was in high school. He was a mutt, found in

a litter of abandoned pups alongside a highway near Waco. One of my friends' sisters

spotted them as she was driving home. He lived with Mother and Daddy until shortly

before I married. When we left Estes Avenue, my mother adopted the first of several cats.

The last cat actually belonged to the Robbins family, who lived across the street from

Mother and Daddy on Humble Avenue, but when Daddy charmed him with cat chow,

Henry moved in with my parents. After Daddy died, Henry stayed with Mother until she

left for her retirement home. Only then did Henry pick up and return to his true owners

across the street.

Long before the war, Daddy was ambitious. He had done his two years at Texas

Tech, the new college in Lubbock, before he dropped out to help support his mother. His

brother, Mark, was in medical school, so taking care of her fell to Dad. He had started at

the bottom and worked his way up at CIT. But in Midland, Daddy hoped for more.

He had grown up in the Depression, in the Dust Bowl. His family and others had

survived on backyard gardens and the fact that most people kept a cow tethered behind

their homes. Otherwise, they had lost everything, so Daddy refused to waste anything. He

did not buy fancy clothes, wouldn't spend the money to join a country club. He was

generous, but he didn't give my mother Christmas presents. In his world, Christmas was

for children. Adults had no need for frivolous gifts. If Mother gave something to Daddy,

it was likely socks or pajamas. A couple times before Christmas, Daddy gave me a dollar

to spend on gifts at Woolworth's. I counted out my change to buy dish towels and other

sensible things. Daddy sold credit, yet he didn't like to have too much owed to the bank,

and he always walked around with a wad of cash. Some of it was for the gambling,

mostly gin rummy games played around the desks in other people's offices, but some was

for the security of knowing that he had several hundred dollars, enough for at least a

month, right there in his pocket, should everything dry up and blow away again. Much

later, when his brain began to betray him and he was no longer able to go to the bank and

withdraw a stack of crisp, green bills, he would reach into his pocket and then forlornly

look over to my mother and say, "We're busted, honey, we're busted." And she would

smile and flash her eyes, and say, "Harold, you may be, but I'm not."

In addition to working at CIT, Daddy soon began building houses on the side.

After the big oil strike in the fall of 1946, landmen, engineers, geologists, roughnecks,

and roustabouts began crowding into Midland and nearby Odessa, and there weren't

enough new homes for all of them. Car financing was a good business. Home building

might prove to be even better. And building a house was something that Daddy could

make his own.

When we went to Lubbock on the weekends, he loved to drive around and point

out houses that his father had built. Daddy taught himself how to draw a floor plan and

the basics of construction. By the late 1940s, about the time my baby brother was born

and died, Daddy had begun buying small plots of land and putting up houses, starting

with our own new block on Estes Avenue.

Sometimes we lived in a house after Daddy built it. Once he sold it, we simply

packed up and moved down the street into another house. It was like a game of leapfrog

along the block. Daddy also built houses to rent. The house behind us was rented, and my

second-grade teacher and her husband briefly rented a duplex that he built. Except for the

paint, the houses were largely indistinguishable. Each had a little front door with a

covered overhang and windows on either side, and they were all packed in tight, one right

next to another. You could practically hand your neighbors a cup of sugar through the

window. Or hear most everything that was being said.

From the time of the first settlers, West Texas was a land of magnificent distances

and empty range, and the promise and the risk that come with both. Even in the midtwentieth century, many of the cities and towns that sprang up across its flatlands and

ridgelines were unconsciously made to resemble the old stockade forts that were built to

hold off Indian war parties or offset fears of a second Mexican invasion. People pulled

together and looked inward, rather than out to the unknown. Shared experience was a

powerful bond, and transplants and new arrivals created second families out of friends.

That was how it was for Harold and Jenna Welch and Charlie and Mary White,

who rented the tiny white house behind us on Estes Avenue. When I was three, I loved

running over to Charlie and Mary's; I was forever rapping at their door. My mother told

them they could just ignore me. But I was persistent. I'd knock on the front door, and if

they didn't answer, I'd go around to the kitchen door in the back and catch them sitting at

their table. And I'd say, "Oh, there you are." I never got the hint that they didn't answer

the door on purpose.

When I was five, Mary got pregnant, and the day Linda, their daughter, was born,

Charlie came to tell me first. He walked in the front door early in the morning. No one

ever thought about locking up in Midland. When I came out of my room, Mother was

already heading for the kitchen to whip up a celebratory batch of pancakes. Charlie and

Mary were so much like family that we had Christmas with them every year. At first,

when I was little and they didn't have children, they would come and have Christmas

with us. After Linda and then Larry were born, we alternated, one house hosted

Christmas Eve, the other Christmas Day. Mary, Charlie, and my mother would cook

Christmas Eve dinner, a huge production of intricately stuffed Hungarian cabbage rolls.

Daddy provided the recipe, courtesy of one of his CIT employees who was Hungarian.

Over time, the cabbage rolls gave way to bubbling platters of enchiladas or tamales. For

Christmas Day, either Mary or my mother roasted a turkey. Long after we had moved

from Estes Avenue, long after I was grown, we still celebrated Christmas with the

Whites. For Mother and Daddy, those shared Christmases with a house full of eager

children and paper and presents were the holidays that they had dreamed of but that had

remained just beyond their grasp.

When my own daughters, Barbara and Jenna, were born, Linda made them

elaborate felt stockings to recall our Christmases together. The girls still hang them in

front of the fireplace every December 24.

All told, Estes Avenue had five houses crammed on one little block, with their

bits of patchy front lawn and matching concrete front walks. Because it was right after

the war and supplies were costly and scarce, the houses were built with the most basic

materials--plain board siding, no shutters on the windows. Their walls couldn't go up fast

enough. The oil companies were bringing people into Midland, and nearly everyone who

arrived needed a house. At one point, during an earlier boom, the Humble Oil and

Refining Company, which would later become Exxon, picked up over seventy houses,

packed them onto trucks, and moved them from a temporary oil camp into Midland. They

were deposited all over the city, where families added rooms and stuck brick veneers on

the fronts. They became many of Midland's earliest homes.

Indeed, for about a century, you can chart Midland's progress like the rings of a

tree, the fat years of the oil or cattle booms, the thin years of the busts. From Hogan's

Folly, the downtown expanded out into the steel office towers of the fifties, then the

smoky glass high-rises of the late seventies and early eighties. The houses were the same,

the early, wide-porch wooden ranch houses with lattice and gables and their own

windmills to pump precious water, then the tiny 1930s and '40s ramblers, then the

comfortable brick ranch houses of the 1950s, with their big picture windows and wood

trim, then the slant-roofed, brown-brick town homes of the late 1970s and early '80s.

Midland would build and then stop, wait years, and then begin the frenzy of building all

over again.

On Estes Avenue, parents could turn their children loose and let them roam.

Mothers sent their kids outside every afternoon. We'd play kick the can, tag, Red Rover,

and other games that were mostly excuses to run through the vacant lots nearby. The lots

were scrubby little squares of land where no one had built anything yet, and they were

covered with mesquite trees, which are considered trash trees in large parts of Texas. A

few people darkly swear that horse thieves brought them up from Mexico and planted

them to hide their stolen animals in. More likely, their seeds rode north on the flanks of

longhorns during endless cattle drives. Some of the cattle also ate mesquite beans and

dropped the pods back down to the ground in their manure. Whatever its origin, mesquite

seemed to be the only tree that actually thrived in the arid Midland ground. "Thrived"

may be too strong a word. Our mesquite trees were stunted little things, parched and dry

like most everything around them, with fluttery leaves that looked like ferns. But when I

was young, it seemed very exotic to race through the mesquite, following the narrow

paths that other kids' feet had already worn. Because Midland was so new, there were

kids all over the neighborhood, growing hot and restless in their tiny postwar homes.

When the streets and lots were quiet, my mother would still turn me out, bundling

me off on adventures of her own creation. One of her particular favorites was the solo

picnic, where I ate lunch among the soft flurry of birds and leaves. I remember her

carefully packing a sack, handing me a jug of milk, and sending me scampering off to the

park over on the next street. It was hardly a park; it was little more than an oddly shaped

triangle of leftover land where two streets intersected. Someone had planted a cluster of

elms at each end. But there was a shiny metal swing, and to a small child, it was a big

expanse, far larger than the few square feet of our own yard. I would sit under the rustling

trees, unwrap my sandwich, open my milk jug, and eat my solo picnic.

The last house that Daddy built on Estes Avenue sat on the corner of Estes and

Big Spring. It was the only brick home on the whole block. We lived there until I was

eight. When television came to Midland, Daddy had the garage bricked over and

enclosed to make a den.

By then, Daddy was building houses almost full-time. He had gone in with a

partner, Lloyd Waynick. Lloyd didn't have children and he liked to sleep late, so Daddy

would head to the house sites early and Lloyd would take the afternoon shift while Daddy

slipped home for a quick nap. They were always looking for new sites. They bought land

from ranchers or cotton farmers who wanted to get out of farming as well as empty tracts

along the ever-expanding edges of Midland. Daddy's face was perpetually sunburned, his

left arm twice as dark as his right from resting it on the open car window as he drove

from job site to job site, from strip of land to strip of land.

Daddy built houses for people moving in with the oil business, and in the boom

years, the buyers just kept coming. He built only spec houses. No matter how many times

someone asked, he refused to build a custom home. "Too expensive with people changing

their minds," he maintained. Daddy had no interest in ripping out cabinets or carpeting or

moving a den simply because someone had seen a picture in a furniture catalog or a

magazine. Nearly all of Daddy's houses had the identical floor plan. The few times that

he experimented and built a different plan, the house took months to sell. Buyers wanted

their houses to have a living room at the front, a den behind it, and a hallway with three

bedrooms, one hall bath, and one bath in the master bedroom, plus a kitchen and a utility

room. They were sturdy, ranch-style houses, not very different from thousands of other

homes all over the United States. By the time he had finished building, Daddy had put up

dozens of homes in and around Midland.

Yet if anything ever needed fixing in our house, that was purely my mother's

domain. Daddy wasn't handy at all. He didn't even change lightbulbs. My mother did

those things and repaired what she could or had a serviceman or one of Daddy's men do

it. He could oversee construction and draw floor plans, but he wasn't much good with an

actual hammer or wrench in his hands.

Now on the weekends, instead of going to Lubbock, we would drive around

Midland. We'd ride slowly up and down the streets, and Daddy would point and say, "I

built that house. I built that house. That's one of my houses."

But mostly we drove just to drive. It was how we got out of the house. People in

Midland didn't walk, they drove everywhere. Kids rode their bikes until they turned

fourteen and could get behind the wheel of a car on their own. On restless days, we

merely drove longer and farther. Daddy could drive from Midland to Dallas in six hours

and from Midland to El Paso in another six. And those were the drives we did. After he

got home from work on a Friday night, we'd head for the car and drive six hours to my

grandparents in El Paso or my uncle Mark in Dallas. Occasionally, when I was little, we

would drive into Arkansas to visit my mother's grandmother, who lived on a small slip of

a dairy farm right near my grandfather's two old-maid sisters and bachelor brother. Each

time we crossed the border, my father would joke about all the trees in Arkansas, making

it sound as if we were people who had never seen a tree.

The Texas roads of my memory, seen from the backs of our roomy Fords, were

wide, flat, and smooth, in part because it was an energy-producing state but also because

Texas was so very big and everything was so far away. You could drive for an entire day

and still be inside Texas. A hundred years before, men had set out in wagons and on

horseback to follow trampled grass trails; today it was gas-powered engines from Detroit

humming over million-dollar roads. Modern-day Texas was designed around driving, and

vast sums were spent on the state's highways. I remember the minute we drove across the

state line into New Mexico, the roads became pitted and rutted and I would rattle and

bump around on the long bench seat, pressing my legs down and digging in with my

knees. No one ever thought of using seat belts; there weren't any in the car. Sometimes in

the heat my skin stuck to the upholstery until I would have to peel it off like a thick roll

of sticky tape.

In New Mexico, my parents liked to drive to a horse track with the fancy name of

Ruidoso Downs. Although it officially opened in 1947, the owners must have had dreams

of becoming the Churchill Downs of the West. Ruidoso was up in the mountains, about

four or five hours away. Mother and Daddy would watch the quarter horse races, which

had big purses, and gamble. They liked to splurge and buy a day pass to the Jockey Club,

where the seats were shaded and the food was rich but not fancy. There were steaming

bowls of hot New Mexican chili, and alcohol, of course, cold beers and mixed drinks. I

might have had a Coke or a Shirley Temple with a fat, bright red cherry. We would sit in

the club, and Mother and Daddy would lean in to see the races, their eyes riveted to the

thundering hooves of the horses, the dirt track smarting as they barreled along in a full

run.

I loved going to Ruidoso because it was cool up in the mountains and there was a

hint of dampness to the air. It was the closest cool place to Midland. Occasionally, you

could see snowcaps and, in summer, tall, heavy pines that pierced the sky. It was so very

different from the long, flat land around Midland, where the roads stretched unchanged

toward the oblivion of the horizon.

We made long drives every summer. We drove all the way to California, to

Newport Beach and Balboa and Catalina Island, where the water was a deep turquoise

blue, almost as mesmerizing as the Midland sky, and blubbery brown sea lions screeched

and sunned themselves on the jagged rocks. We kayaked over the tops of silent kelp

forests, and my mother stared in wonder at pelicans scanning for fish in the sea. We slept

in a no-frills motel outside the newly opened Disneyland, with its horse-drawn streetcars

and King Arthur Carrousel. A few years, we headed east to the swampy bayou port cities

of New Orleans and Houston. We drove to San Antonio almost every summer, and each

time we'd visit the Alamo. We'd stay at the old Menger Hotel, which kept alligators in a

couple of planters on either side of the cavernous lobby fireplace. It had a swimming pool

too, which to me was one of the best things about vacations.

Yet it was on those trips, when there were only the three of us, that I felt the

overwhelming absence of a brother or sister. Mother and Daddy sat chatting in the front

of the car, while I rode in the back alone. If we stopped at a motel with a pool, Daddy

might swim a few laps with me, but there were no games of Marco Polo, no splashing

races or dives to touch the bottom. Other times, Mother came down and sat by the pool to

watch me while I went in by myself. I'm not sure what she would have done if I had

suddenly started struggling in the chlorinated water. She had never learned to swim.

And there was the particular loneliness of being an only child among the throngs

at a crowded amusement park. Once, in New Orleans, when we had stopped at the park

next to Lake Pontchartrain, it was my mother who was drafted to ride behind me in the

two-seater Wild Mouse roller-coaster car. She screamed the entire time.

As I grew older, when we went to Ruidoso, my parents would let me invite a

friend. A few times, other families traveled with us on our summer jaunts, two cars

setting off in a caravan to whatever destination the fathers had picked. When we drove to

Newport Beach, at the edge of the Pacific Ocean, it was with our next-door neighbors

Ann and Joe Morse and their daughter, Laurie. After a few days in California, Mother

and Daddy and Ann and Joe left Laurie and me with her grandparents while they got in

the car and headed off across the desert to Vegas to gamble, and then drove all the way

back to get us and head home.

By the time I was six, my parents decided that I was ready to travel on my own

and sent me on the train to El Paso to visit my grandparents. They handed my ticket to

the porter at the Midland station and waved me off. Mother had packed a lunch for me

because she didn't think I was old enough to go into the dining car and write down what I

wanted on the little pad of paper. It was a nearly six-hour train ride, through Pecos, Van

Horn, and Sierra Blanca, across sparse, open land and long-vanished buffalo trails. My

grandparents, Grammee and Papa, would meet me at the station in their old pickup truck

and drive me out to Canutillo, in the upper Rio Grande Valley outside El Paso, where

they had their home.

I loved my Grammee with a particular devotion. Jessie Laura Hawkins, my

mother's mother, had been only twenty-one when Mother was born. She was nearly three

decades younger than Grandma Welch and still quite young. And she loved to play. Not

only did she make my clothes and doll clothes but she also built my doll furniture by

hand, little couches covered in lush brown velvet with tiny navy velvet pillows edged in

rich gold braid. I thought they were the most elegant things I had ever seen. Grammee,

whose own childhood had been cut perilously short, lovingly created so much of my own.

Jessie and Hal had moved to El Paso in 1927; like the Welches, both had been

born in Arkansas. But Grammee's mother's family had come from France. Grammee

always thought that her mother, Eva Louise LaMaire, had been born in Paris, which no

doubt sounded infinitely more glamorous, but in fact she was born in New York City not

long after her own parents arrived on an immigrant ship and passed through the gates of

Ellis Island. From the teeming crowds and clanking noise of New York, the LaMaires

headed west to landlocked Arkansas. However it was spelled, they always pronounced

their name "la mer," French for the sea. My great-grandmother was eighteen when she

married Joseph Sherrard, who had been born in Mississippi in the middle of the Civil

War. On the actual day of his birth, April 7, 1862, the Battle of Shiloh was raging 150

miles away. They settled on a small dairy farm beyond Little Rock, in a place so tucked

away and destitute that no one bothered to paint the houses, they simply left the wood to

gray, swell, and shrink under the cycle of rain and sun. My great-grandmother bore eight

children, seven girls who lived, and one boy, Joseph Jr., who died. Then one morning

when my great-grandmother was about forty-two, and newly pregnant with her last

daughter, her husband headed out into the field where his cows grazed. He had his

shotgun with him, loaded, and he held it up to his head and pulled the trigger. The family

whispered that he did it because of all those girls. I sometimes wonder if any of those

same girls were tasked that day with helping their mother carry in their father's corpse.

Eva Louise buried her husband and kept on milking the cows, whose udders were full

each morning whether someone had died or not. She ran the farm and raised her brood of

girls for the rest of her days. I remember stopping to visit her a few times on those trips to

Arkansas, when she was a shrunken old woman still living a hard, rural life.

My grandmother never told my mother about the suicide. Instead, Mother heard

the story from Papa's side of the family, his two old-maid sisters, who lived with his

bachelor brother in Little Rock. Jessie Sherrard was barely nine when her father marched

out into that field. After he died, she drove the milk truck for the dairy farm. When she

met my grandfather, he worked as a postman, driving a postal truck. He had barely any

memories of his own father, who died when Papa was three.

Papa's health was what drove the Hawkinses to move west. He had asthma, and

everyone believed that the dry desert air in the Southwest contained some kind of magical

cure. Thousands of World War I veterans who had been gassed in the trenches across

France had moved to New Mexico, Arizona, and the far reaches of West Texas, seeking a

balm for their ravaged lungs. My grandparents settled in the upper valley, one block from

the Rio Grande, which rolled and lapped in its riverbed before it turned narrow and

sluggish alongside the city of El Paso itself. They chose a place right off Highway 80, the

main road to California before the government put through the interstate. As late as the

1950s, it hummed with cars making their way west. Jessie and Hal built a small tourist

court, a cluster of tiny one-room cottages with a single communal bathroom in the

middle. During the Depression, carloads of people fleeing the devastation of the Dust

Bowl and the complete collapse of life back east would stop at a tourist court to shower

and sleep in the primitive cottages or doze in their cars or outside on the warm ground

before moving on to California's promised land. To supplement what little they made

from the tourist court, my grandparents opened a grocery, where they sold bologna,

pickles, loaves of bread, and a few other staples that people might buy before they

crossed the New Mexico line to traverse the desert beyond.

They also ran a lumberyard, and at one point Hal Hawkins had enough money to

buy a small block off of Highway 80 and put up a few houses, just as my father later did

in Midland. Grammee and Papa built their own house on that street. It was an orange

house, covered in smooth, orange-glazed brick, surplus from the Army's rush to slap up

vast new kitchens and dining halls for the freshly minted troops converging on Fort Bliss.

My grandfather may have gotten it for free or talked his way into buying it at a cut rate.

However he got it, every brick was a bright, shocking orange. One day in 1943, when

Mother brought Daddy home to meet her parents, the first thing he saw was Jessie

Hawkins down on her knees with a bucket of mortar that she had mixed herself and a

trowel in her hand, laying brick. That was how Harold Welch met his future mother-inlaw. My father always enjoyed telling that story, invariably adding his own punch line:

that when he first saw Jessie, he thought, Great, I'm marrying into a family whose women

can do anything.

I loved going to visit Grammee and Papa for those two or three weeks in the

summer, to be enveloped by the desert heat and lulled by the simple repetition of

Grammee's daily routine. It was, I suppose now, not so far removed from daily chores in

Midland--cooking, watering the yard, doing the wash and the cleaning, and the endless

sweeping out of the house. But the location was infinitely more interesting, with the Rio

Grande on one side and the Franklin Mountains bumping up against us on the other. And

Grammee was fascinating. Unlike most mothers I knew, who wore dresses and aprons,

she wore pants, hats, gloves, and big, long-sleeved shirts to cover her skin because out in

the valley the sun is especially bright and searing. The Texas poet Marian Haddad wrote

once about El Paso, "The sun is different here." "Drastic and dense," she called it, and it

truly is. There is something thick and liquid about the light, more than can be accounted

for by the fact that El Paso sits up closer to the sun than Midland.

Grammee was a collector too, her house and garden an artful arrangement of what

man and nature had left behind. She saved old Mexican coins, many of them gold, and

smooth Indian grindstones that wandering or fleeing tribes had abandoned along the

rough paths in the Franklin foothills. Tucked away in a wooden drawer was a little box of

shells and the tiny, perfect skeleton of a sea horse, what remained of an all but forgotten,

long-ago visit to the sea. She collected rocks, each with its own lengthy geological tale,

and empty glass bottles that others casually tossed aside. Her bottles grew so numerous

that she built a ring of shelves for them above the windows on her modest, windowcovered porch. The less interesting and more ubiquitous beer bottles she dispatched to her

garden, where she marked off her flower beds by planting their stubby necks deep in the

ground until only the glinting round bottoms peeked up from the earth.

Most of Grammee's garden, aside from where she grew a patch of asparagus that

reliably sprouted year after year, was a wonderful, vast rock garden. There was no trash

collection out where she and Papa lived, hence the bottles, so whatever they couldn't

reuse was recycled into that garden. She planted flowers inside the well of an enormous

rubber tire that must have rolled off a truck plodding along the highway or gone flat and

been left behind. In another corner, a faded wagon wheel stuck up from the sand. She

took broken bits of pottery and cemented them onto urns that she placed along a wall

constructed of her own homemade cinder block, which she made from a rectangular mold

that she filled with concrete mix. She grew yuccas, ocotillos, magueys, and pomegranate

trees, and a big, bright swath of daffodils. The bulbs had come from her mother's house in

Arkansas. When my mother moved to Midland, Grammee divided up the bulbs and gave

some to Mother, who planted them in her yard and lovingly dug them up and replanted

them each time she moved to another house. When I married George and came back to

Midland, Mother did the same for me, appearing on my doorstep with one hundred bulbs,

the offspring of that long-fallow Arkansas yard, four generations removed.

Sometimes I would follow Grammee around, but mostly I played, staking out a

corner of the garden. I built sprawling sand ranches that stretched across the ground and

meticulously arranged the plump mesquite beans that I had chosen to be my cattle. But I

was rarely alone. Nuway Drive, Grammee and Papa's block, was teeming with other

children, and they became my friends all those summers. Mornings were spent outside in

the baking heat. Then, once the blazing sun settled atop the sky, we retreated inside to eat

our main meal and lie down for a siesta. Only in the late afternoon did we get up and

bathe. My grandmother would put on a dress, and my grandfather would change his shirt

and pants, and we'd all go for a ride in his pickup truck. If it was just the three of us, I sat

wedged between them in the cab, but most of the time, I piled in the flatbed with an

assortment of neighborhood kids and Bully, our old Midland dog. Then we'd be off,

bumping along the levee road that edged right up against the Rio Grande.

Papa would stop, lift Bully out of the truck, and send him running toward the

river. Bully would plunge in and paddle about the placid Rio Grande. Then he'd get out,

shake, and run after the truck until he had dried off, and Papa would hoist Bully back in.

To a six-or seven-year-old, those late-afternoon rides seemed like the greatest adventures

in the world.

There was a wildness too in the upper valley that did not exist among the

imported trees and rectangular subdivision grids of Midland. Once, behind the orange

house, I came upon Bully shaking a rattlesnake to death in his terrier teeth. I watched as

the rattler's body broke into pieces, one portion of his scales flying through the open

window of the truck cab. It was terrible and mesmerizing at the same time.

In the evenings, we'd sit in our clean, "dressed-up" clothes in Grammee and

Papa's living room and talk. Then Grammee would fix supper, usually a bowl of cereal or

a dish of ice cream, which we ate at the kitchen table. The kitchen of my childhood

memory is a large and spacious room; only much later did I step inside and discover that

it was quite small.

The whole house was small. It was a four-square house, only four rooms--two

bedrooms, the living room, and the kitchen--with a little center hall. There was an

evaporative air conditioner set up on the roof over the center hall to mitigate the heat, a

"swamp cooler," we called it. Papa would finally turn it on around four in the afternoon,

when the heat had become almost unbearable. But at night, because of the desert, the

house was cool. We slept with the windows open. I spent the night on a double bed in the

little guest room, but I was not alone. When the lights went out, Grammee would slip in

wearing her plain cotton nightie to sleep with me. I can still remember how great it felt to

lie there in the quiet dark, with only a sheet resting on top, as the cool desert breeze

wafted in.

And I remember too the unspoken comfort of those nights as we drifted off and

Grammee held my hand, not letting go until long after we were both asleep.

Grammee and Papa had a pattern to their life that I liked, and I could imagine

living like that, in the quiet of the valley, with the sand and the river and the sun.

Sometimes, particularly when Mother and Daddy came, we went for longer drives,

following the valley out into neighboring New Mexico, heading past the acres of pecan

trees at the Stahlman Farm and past San Miguel, with its tiny church built entirely of

black volcanic rock, all the way up past the rich farmland to Las Cruces. I would sit in the

back of the car, the bright light radiating through the window, and daydream about living

on a ranch in the upper valley, raising hot green chilies, onions, and pecans.

For years, every visit to El Paso included a McGinney and a trip to Ju'rez. The

McGinney was Papa's own creation. He liked to drink a beer before lunch, and when I

visited, he would fix me what he called a McGinney, a little shot glass filled with a

swallow of cold, foamy beer. I drank Papa's McGinneys until I turned seven. That year, I

signed the temperance pledge card that sat in the back of every seat in the pews at the

First Methodist Church in Midland. Worshipers were expected to sign the pledge and

drop it in the collection plate. Once I signed, I gave up McGinneys, at least for a little

while.

But I did not give up Ju'rez. When they visited, Mother and Daddy would go over

at night for dinner or to sit in a club with their El Paso friends. In the daylight, it was my

turn to cross into Mexico, with Grammee and Papa and sometimes with Mother and

Daddy as well. We'd drive to El Paso, park the car, and walk across the barbed-wire-laced

bridge with the river draining below. On the other side, Grammee and Papa would stop

for a Mexican beer; then we headed for the open-air market, which beckoned with

baskets, embroidered cotton tops, hand-hewn guitars, and wooden puppets. The pottery

was my favorite. I ambled from stall to stall, comparing brightly painted birds and red

and green leaves on miniature tea sets, carefully selecting my purchase. Today, at home

in Crawford and Dallas, I have cabinets and shelves lined with vibrant Mexican jugs and

bowls.

Afterward, we'd make our way back across the bridge, bundles tied and clutched

in our hands. But before we could reenter El Paso, each of us had to speak to a U.S.

Customs officer. Grammee and Papa made me thoroughly rehearse "I am a citizen of the

United States," so I would not suddenly go mute or say the wrong thing. As much as I

relished those excursions, the returns always seemed a bit perilous, with the specter of

being stuck for days on that bridge, in a concrete and barbed-wire limbo between the

United States and Mexico.

El Paso continued to call to me long after I had grown. I decamped there for a

summer in college, taking classes at Mother's old Texas College of Mines and

Metallurgy, which was now Texas Western and has since been renamed for a third time

as University of Texas at El Paso. I came again as a woman in my forties and my fifties,

to talk to writers, stroll through art galleries, take in the city and the land. With my friend

Adair Margo, I climbed the rugged trails of Mount Cristo Rey to the great cream

limestone carving of Christ on the cross, which sits above what had been a favorite mule

watering hole for the northern-bound Spanish conquistadors. The last Sunday in October,

devout religious pilgrims will crawl on their knees up the same rocky trails to

demonstrate their fealty to God.

There remains something mystical about El Paso, built into a mountain pass that

divides Mexico and Texas, sliced by the Rio Grande in its winding journey into the Gulf

of Mexico. But perhaps other factors account for the city's magnetic pull. In 1971, a

Texas biochemist declared the city's groundwater to be heavily fortified with lithium in

its natural state. Some of my longtime El Paso friends say that people who move away

invariably find themselves moving back. Because they're not happy anywhere else but in

El Paso.

For much of my early childhood, I was on my way to becoming partially blind. I

could not make out anything that was not directly in front of me. I could not see the line

of the curb or down the sidewalk or over to the corner. Shiny bikes, birds in trees, all

were equally a blur. I finally got glasses in the second grade, and even then it was partly

by accident. Midland public schools required their students to read an eye chart. When it

was my turn, I could barely make out the biggest letters, and the school nurse sent an

official letter home to mother, informing her that I had failed my eye exam. My mother

berated herself for allowing me to walk around in this particular fog. She shook her head

and said it should have been obvious to her. My mother is also extremely nearsighted.

We have the same thing, progressive myopia. By her seventh-grade year, Mother's vision

had so deteriorated that Grammee and Papa kept her out of school for a year and sent her

to Arkansas, to live with Hal's old-maid sisters, Gertie and Kitty, and "rest" her eyes. The

cure failed. Her glasses were as thick as bottles. Mine would be the same had I not been

fitted for contacts at age thirteen.

I still remember leaving the eye doctor's office, my first pair of glasses perched

awkwardly on my nose. And then I looked up. I was shocked to see individual leaves on

the trees. I knew that trees had leaves, but I had not realized how distinct each one

looked, even those of the squat mesquite that brushed over my head as I darted about

those vacant lots on Estes Avenue. Midland suddenly came into focus on that sidewalk.

But I think this partial blindness and the knowledge that one cracked lens could

temporarily plunge me back into that narrow, myopic realm made me more cautious

physically and less of a risk taker. When you do not know where edges begin and end,

you are frequently surprised by what is hard or sharp.

My first school was Alyne Gray's Jack and Jill School, which she taught in her

modest backyard inside a wooden lean-to shack, where the wind whistled right up against

the wood. I started there when I was not quite five years old. It was Alyne's first year of

running a school. Alyne's mother, Mrs. Odom, was a friend of Grandma Welch's in

Lubbock. My mother recalls how Daddy had been instructed to look out for Alyne when

he moved to Midland, and Alyne was told to look out for Harold Welch. They found each

other when Mother introduced herself to Alyne across the fence alongside their first tiny

home, before they moved to Estes Avenue. That was the shrunken world of Midland.

Alyne's husband died young, and the school was how she supported herself and

her children, Jane and Robert. Daddy later built a new cinder-block school for her on a

sandy patch along Garfield Street, in a newer part of town. Because the public schools

didn't offer kindergarten, Jack and Jill was the first school for many Midland kids. I met

Susie Marinis there among the paste and waxy crayons, and, a few years after me, Alyne

would teach a smiling boy named Jebbie Bush.

Most kids left after one year, but because I was a November baby, I was too

young to start first grade. I was five and three-quarters when September arrived, and the

schools would not admit any five-year-olds into first grade. Susie was the same, having

been born in late October, so we spent another year at Jack and Jill. When I was not yet

seven, my parents enrolled me at North Elementary in the Midland public schools. There

were, apparently, no rules about how old you had to be to enter the second grade.

As a result, I was always the youngest in my class, right up through college, when

I graduated at age twenty-one, and I think I was a bit immature compared to the other

kids, constantly trying to catch up and never quite succeeding. But I loved school. I

adored my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Gnagy; I stayed in touch with her until she died.

She and her husband rented a house from Mother and Daddy on that Estes Avenue block.

Her husband worked as a geologist for Phillips Petroleum in Midland; he had fought in

the war and then headed off to college in Kansas on the GI Bill. I don't know whether it

was because she lived on our street or because I simply loved school--I loved the bright

lead pencils and the thick practice paper and the readers and how letters and numbers

would appear and then disappear across the vast blackboards--but I believed with all my

second-grade heart that I was Mrs. Gnagy's favorite.

At recess, when the other kids were running on the dirt in their flat-bottomed

canvas sneakers and leaping over whooshing jump ropes, I would stand with Mrs. Gnagy.

She would wrap her arms around me, and I would lean against her. The other secondgrade teacher, Mrs. McQuestin, would stand next to Mrs. Gnagy and hold her arms

around another little girl, Gwyne Smith. Gwyne and I, nestled in the reassuring arms of

these teachers, would look at each other while the two adults talked above us and the

playground rang with the noise of races and bouncing balls.

I so wanted to be like Mrs. Gnagy, who was all of twenty-two and a newlywed

when she gathered me in her arms. At home, I played school, lining up my dolls on the

floor of my room for instruction and Scotch-taping pictures to my little mirror so that it

would look like a classroom bulletin board. I taught my dolls writing and reading and

solemnly held up picture books in front of their bright, painted eyes. I always wished that

I had brothers or sisters who might sit at their imaginary desks for the lessons, but I

happily made do with my dolls.

I was still very much a little girl. I sucked my thumb at night and in the

afternoons, when we put our heads down on our desks to rest after lunch. I'd put in my

thumb and twist my face away so Mrs. Gnagy wouldn't see and tell my mother. My

parents tried everything to get me to stop sucking my thumb, direly explaining that it was

riddled with all kinds of invisible germs. I responded by becoming something of an

obsessive hand washer, holding up both hands to walk into the dining room and

immediately rushing back to the sink if one of them so much as grazed a wall. Eventually

they gave up and waited for me to outgrow it, which I did.

It was easy perhaps to be sad in Midland, sad from loss, sad from loneliness.

"Terrible winds and a wonderful emptiness" were the painter Georgia O'Keeffe's doubleedged words about the Texas desert plains, which I read years later, after I was grown.

But in our home, where month after month, year after year, it might have been possible to

feel sadness or at least an empty veil of loss, we were not sad. Every day, several times a

day, my mother and I would hear the hum of the car engine and the slam of the door that

announced Daddy was home. He invariably walked in whistling his favorite song, "Up a

Lazy River," which was so catchy coming off his puckered lips that our resident

mockingbird took up the tune. Along with the dust on his shoes, he always seemed to

bring home a funny story about someone in town, not mean or malicious but simply

funny, because Harold and Jenna Welch loved to laugh. They laughed at the kitchen table

or chuckled in the den over some story Daddy had found in the newspaper. Daddy

laughed when he ate hot chilies and jalapenos and his bald head began to sweat, and he

would run his napkin through the last remaining strands of his perpetually thinning hair.

And he laughed with his friends, many of whom he had known since they had grown up

together in Lubbock.

Mother and Daddy had a wide circle of friends, from Daddy's buddies at Johnny's

Bar-B-Q to Mother's bridge group and her ladies at church, where she taught Sunday

school. Daddy wasn't much of a churchgoer, not because he was godless but because an

hour was a bit too long for him to be without a lit cigarette in his hand. They had their

couples friends too, whom they met for dinner parties, and it is that steady rhythm of

friendship that I remember so completely from our lives back then.

We were happy in all our houses, especially in that brick one at the end of the

block on Estes Avenue, with its step-down den that had been a garage until television

came to Midland and Daddy converted it. The floor was a light red brick and on the

hottest summer days still managed to remain cool. Mother had a low marble-top table

made to give the room the air of early 1950s sophistication. We watched *Your Hit Parade*

and Ed Sullivan on the black-and-white television. KMID-Midland was the only station,

and it didn't come on the air until four o'clock. The very first show was *Two-Gun*

Playhouse, and all the kids raced home from school to sit glued to the old western. KMID

stopped broadcasting in the evening, when it signed off with "The Star-Spangled Banner"

and a flag and then it dissolved to a test pattern. There was nothing but silence and snow

until four the next afternoon.

Mother introduced me to literature in that house, starting with Golden Book

stories about Snow White and Pinocchio. Suddenly I was transported. The curtain on my

imagination lifted. We began *Little Women* when I was only seven years old. I listened

curled up with her on the top of the guest room bed--the house had three bedrooms, but

we only had use for two of them, so one was set aside untouched for guests--mesmerized

by the lives of the four March girls. I can still remember the tears running down my

cheeks when Beth died, while alongside me, Mother's eyes welled and her voice cracked

as she read the story of this fragile, imaginary Victorian girl who would not live to the

end of the novel.

When second grade was over, we moved again. Off the Estes Avenue block

completely, away from the little Collins grocery just around the corner on Big Spring

Street and the little toy store two storefronts down. I had spent hours gazing lovingly into

its windows at a Tiny Tears doll, who looked right back at me with her bright marble

eyes, until one Christmas she found her way into Santa's oversize sack. Our new house

was on Princeton Avenue, with a covered carport at the end of the driveway and a giant

red oak in the front yard, which Mother had imported all the way from Abilene. The tree

was, for both of my parents, the height of extravagance, dug up and moved on a truck,

but Mother wanted her full-grown tree, and Daddy was determined that she have it. As

with all our other houses, my father had overseen the building of this one, but it was a

fancier house, with a front hallway and picture windows and bits of decorative timber to

offset the brick. My room was on the corner, looking out across the yard to the street and

to whatever else lay beyond.

My mother set about fixing up what we called "the Big House." It had a turquoise

refrigerator in the kitchen and bright turquoise Formica countertops. She picked out

turquoise bed skirts for my twin beds and matching flowered coverlets. She kept the

books for my father's house-building business, and she cooked. For most of her marriage,

my mother made three full meals every day. Even before he began building houses, when

Daddy had worked at CIT and wasn't on the road, he always came home for lunch.

Mother would be up at dawn each morning making coffee and eggs or pancakes.

Then she would wash up and prepare lunch. At the end of the day, she cooked dinner. We

ate mostly what would be considered Southern or rural food; Daddy's favorite meal was

Mother's chicken-fried steak, a grainy cut of meat dipped in egg-and-flour batter and

crisp-fried in bubbling oil, with cream gravy and homemade French fries on the side.

Both Mother and Daddy had grown up in rural enough towns that the table was set by

what was coming off the vine or out of the field. They both looked forward to the corn

coming in each summer, and we loaded up on bags whenever we stopped in Lubbock or

El Paso. They bought sweet, juicy Pecos cantaloupes, and some years, Daddy planted

tomato vines. He also had an onion patch in the backyard because he liked to pull an

onion or two for dinner. He grew squash, long and thin and a little bit tough because it

never soaked up enough water, even with the hose, to swell up tender and plump. All

summer, my mother made squash and chilies for lunch or supper. She called it a famous

Texas recipe, but it was squash, green chilies, and Velveeta cheese baked together in a

casserole. Or she would make fried squash. In high summer and early fall, we hardly ever

ate anything out of a can.

My mother considered herself a dainty eater, and for her entire life she has been

tiny and bird thin, but my dad liked everything, even the jar of pickled pigs' feet that he

kept in the refrigerator. He would eat anchovies or smoked oysters on a cracker, and

sometimes the raw ones as well. Once or twice, Johnny Hackney, who owned Johnny's

Bar-B-Q, would order big barrels of oysters shipped on blocks of ice from the Gulf

Coast. Daddy and Johnny and their friends would sit out on a back porch and eat oysters

as fast as Big Daddy, who worked the grill at the Bar-B-Q, could shuck them. Mother

wrinkled up her nose at the anchovies and the oysters, but I tried them all and loved most

of them.

We ate out too. The fanciest restaurant in Midland was the Blue Star Inn, where

they served delicacies like fried shrimp and grilled sirloin. But Daddy said that he loved

his Jenna's cooking best of all. He wasn't like the other downtown men, who ate lunch out

at a restaurant or ordered at the counter at Woolworth's. And so Mother would listen each

day for his car to come humming up the street right around noon.

I had largely forgotten about those lunches until my wedding. When George and I

got married, George was also working in downtown Midland. Daddy stood up at our

rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding to give a toast. He ended it by looking at

George with a quick wink and saying, "If you go home for lunch, make sure that when

you go back to the office, you have on the same tie."

The main streets in Midland were named Wall Street and Texas and Broadway.

From there, they were christened for distant states, like Ohio, Michigan, and Missouri,

and also for some of the old ranching families, like the Cowdens and the Nobles. But

gradually, as the town spread out into a city and men from the East began to drift in, the

street names changed. First they were named for universities, like Princeton and Harvard,

and then for the oil companies, Gulf, Humble, Shell, and Sinclair. And then, in the later

boom years, when the crosshatch of streets pushed farther into old ranchlands and cotton

fields, they had names like Boeing and Cessna, and eventually lofty English names, like

Wellington and Keswick and Coventry, which graced subdivision cul-de-sacs.

We lived on Princeton Avenue now. Our neighbors were mostly company and

professional families, whose fathers put on ties to go downtown. Many were geologists

and scientists and chemical engineers, men who had studied the science of oil. A few

bankers wore suits. But even the roughnecks who worked on the wells in the fields and

came home covered with grease didn't walk around in their heavy boots and Wrangler

jeans when they came into Midland. The most you might see was the black oil under their

nails, which were almost impossible to scrub clean.

People dressed up to go to church and to go out. At the Blue Star Inn, women

wore dresses and did up their hair, while over at Johnny's Bar-B-Q, men wore jackets and

ties to sit at the rough picnic tables covered with plastic cloths and drink from cold,

dripping pitchers of ice tea. Midland remained a dry town. It wasn't legal to order a

mixed drink at a restaurant with lunch or dinner. Johnny Hackney's friends circumvented

the rule by wandering back into the Bar-B-Q's kitchen to pour their own drinks from a

jug of vodka that Johnny kept in a cabinet.

Midcentury Midland was, however, far from a cultural wasteland. The Yucca

Theater, which abutted Hogan's Folly, showcased musical acts before it was taken over

by the movies. My mother remembers dancing to Guy Lombardo and his orchestra when

they came through Midland on the train from Dallas and stopped for a night to play

before moving on to El Paso. By the mid-1950s, Midland had its own symphony. But the

city was small; it was a place of ice cream sundaes at the Borden dairy and Saturday

morning pony rides around a nearby lot. My own little world didn't extend much beyond

the same four blocks that I walked each morning to James Bowie Elementary School or

the blistering hot metal swings, merry-go-round, and slide at the Ida Jo Moore Park.

During most of my childhood, drought paralyzed West Texas. I recall wind but

very little rain. In a wet year, Midland averages fourteen inches. What few rainstorms we

had became spectacular events, with water rushing down the streets in fast-moving

torrents. Certain roads were built like natural arroyos, with dips in the middle to channel

the runoff into the big parks, like A Street Park, which for the majority of its historical

life had been a buffalo wallow and filled up, lakelike, when it rained. Then, at dusk, the

low places would teem with frogs that had congregated in the damp. We heard their

rhythmic croaking as we fell asleep. They were usually gone by dawn when the sun rose

to bake the ground back to dryness. And every night, the cool air carried the piercing call

of train whistles as miles of freight cars rolled past Midland on the rails.

I was a homebody even as a child. My mother enrolled me in ballet, piano, and

Brownies, but I was happiest at school or at home. The absence of brothers and sisters

had another side: it cemented the deep bonds between my parents and myself. We were a

tightly knit unit of three. My parents took me out to dinner, took me driving. Our lives

intertwined, and I wanted to be with them. I felt my greatest sense of contentment lying

on the couch in our den. I had no desire to stray too far from home or from Mother and

Daddy.

The summer when I was eight, Mother was pregnant with the baby who would

have been my sister. The baby was not due until September, but on July 15, Mother went

into labor. Daddy drove her to Midland Memorial, and I was sent to stay with Alyne Gray

and her daughter, Jane. It was Alyne who told me that my sister had died, that no baby

would be coming home.

Instead, I was the one who was going away. For months, Mother and Daddy had

planned to send me to Camp Mitre Peak, a Girl Scout camp outside Alpine, Texas, where

there were mountains, including the sixteen-hundred-foot-tall Mitre Peak, which looked

like a giant arrowhead covered with green, scrubby brush. I left only a week or two after

Mother lost my sister.

I was so homesick the feeling was almost crushing. Stuck in a completely

unfamiliar place, I missed my parents dreadfully. Camp was nothing like being in El

Paso; at night, there was no Grammee to hold my hand. I sent one letter home. I sat on

my bunk and with my schoolgirl penmanship wrote to Mother and Daddy reminding

them to pick me up on Saturday. When I addressed the envelope, I wrote "Estes Avenue,"

but forgot "Midland, Texas." The letter came back on Friday afternoon. The counselors

gave it to me during mail call, and I sat holding it in my shaking hands. I was convinced

that if my parents didn't get that letter, they wouldn't remember to pick me up the next

morning. I envisioned spending days, perhaps another week, alone in my bunk under the

shadow of the mountain. Sick with worry, I threw up, and the counselors put me to bed.

The next morning, Mother and Daddy showed up exactly on time, and for years they

would tell the story about how I started off running toward Daddy's side of the car and

then stopped and hurriedly turned toward Mother's door, wanting so desperately to hug

them both at once.

I went to Camp Mitre Peak again after seventh grade and adored it. But at age

eight, I preferred home.

When I came through the door in the afternoon, I was greeted by the soft rustle of

book pages and my mother, her feet propped up, book open on her lap. My mother loved

to read. Her canon ranged from the traditional to the eclectic, writers like John Marquand

and Somerset Maugham. She loved Willa Cather, especially *Death Comes for the*

Archbishop. She read eagerly about the Southwest; it didn't matter whether the story was

set in far West Texas or New Mexico or Arizona. She read books about anthropology,

native peoples, and early explorers. She delved into naturalists, like Loren Eiseley. And

she read to me, her voice weaving its spells of character, plot, and place, until I too

yearned to decipher the fine black letters printed on the page. Once I did, I read with my

friends, swapping well-thumbed copies of Cherry Ames, Student Nurse, and Nancy Drew

with Georgia Todd, who owned the complete collection. We loved Nancy not for her

independence or her car--we expected to have the same when we reached eighteen--but

for the twists and turns of the mystery plots and the depictions of friendship. And, like

me, Nancy was an only child making her way in the world.

We did not buy many books; instead, we borrowed from the Midland County

Public Library, located inside the county courthouse, the biggest and most important

building in the city. The courthouse sat in the center of downtown Midland, in a lush

square with watered green grass. But the library was particularly interesting because of its

location: the basement. All of the houses and many of the buildings I knew in Midland

had no basements and hardly any stairs. To enter the cool, dark library, Mother and I had

to walk down an entire flight of stairs. Each visit was exciting before we ever looked at

the books.

If she wasn't reading, my mother wanted to be outside. Jenna Welch was nearly

blind, left-handed, and woefully uncoordinated, but she loved nature. And she was an

extremely knowledgeable self-taught naturalist. She remembered the name of every

wildflower and was passionate about birds. Her fascination began when I was ten and she

volunteered to be my Girl Scout leader. One of our requirements was to earn a bird

badge. The best location for bird-watching in Midland, aside from Rose Acres, the

euphemistic name given to the city's sewer ponds, where bird-watchers congregated

despite the overwhelmingly noxious smell, was the yard of Ola Dublin Haynes, one of

Midland's school librarians. She had let her place grow wild with scrub brush and prairie

grass. We would stand silently with our binoculars, or sit Indian-style, and wait for the

birds to swoop down and alight on the mesquite and prickly stubble. We were rarely

disappointed; each year thousands of birds poured through Midland, which sits along one

of the West's north-south migratory paths.

Mother began carrying binoculars in the car. On almost every long car trip when I

was a teenager, the routine was the same. I would fall asleep, and Mother would gasp,

"Look, there's a hawk" or "Did you see--it's a painted bunting!" and wake me up to see. I

was invariably irritated, but the announcements took. Today I scan the trees for the swish

of wings and am waiting for a screech owl to roost in the owl box nestled atop our live

oak in the front yard.

Once my mother spotted a rare bird, a northern varied thrush, in our backyard. He

had apparently been blown off course during a windstorm and had taken refuge in the

trees. Mother identified it and then called her friends at the Mid-Nats, the Midland

Naturalist Society. For weeks bird-watchers showed up at our front door, hoping to

glimpse the bird and add it to their list. Come lunchtime, geologists and scientists would

arrive and head into the kitchen with their sack lunches to sit at the Formica counter and

wait for the elusive thrush. The few times it appeared, everyone in the room would jump

up and hug each other and hug Mother, thrilled to have seen this small bluish gray bird,

which resembles a robin. My dad would look around and shake his head over all the fuss,

but he never minded driving Mother around with her binoculars to look for whatever

might be there.

The sky, however, was another matter. Mother and I loved the sky. From almost

as far back as I can remember, on a particularly spectacular summer night, Mother would

gather a blanket and we would go outside to lie on the ground and gaze up at the sky. The

wool of the blanket would scratch at our arms and legs, and we could feel the prick of the

hard, sturdy grass blades below.

In Midland, the sky sits overhead like a flawless dome, bowing up from the earth

at the edge of each horizon. The land does not pitch or rise but remains perfectly flat,

without bright lights or tall buildings to obscure our view. So complete was the darkness

that all we saw were the stars and the inky blackness. Above us, the constellations hung

like strands of Christmas lights waiting to be plucked, and I would lift my little-girl arms

to try to touch the glowing orbs. Lying beside me on the blanket, my mother pointed out

Orion, the Little Dipper, Cassiopeia, and the planets, the glowing pink of Venus or the

distant fire of Jupiter, as her mother had done for her. And she would say, "Laura, look at

the sky, because it won't look like this again for another year.

"Look up," she would say, "Laura, look up."

But I wasn't the only one gazing up at that all-encompassing sky. Amid baseball

diamonds, backyard slides, and sandlots, another child was listening to the croak of frogs

and watching for the stars. That boy was George W. Bush. My Midland childhood was

his as well. We were the same age, and only about ten blocks separated our two homes,

his on Ohio, mine on Princeton. My elementary school friends Mike Proctor and Robert

McCleskey played catch with George; his dad, George H. W. Bush, coached the local

Little League. The Bushes lived in Midland from the time George was three until the year

1959, but the closest he and I ever came to meeting was passing each other in the

hallways of the seventh grade at San Jacinto Junior High.

By age twelve, I was old enough to ride my bike on a Saturday morning to the

Rexall drugstore for a ham sandwich. But, like most twelve-year-old girls, I longed to do

more grown-up things.

In Midland, our first escape came directly from Hollywood. For two hours in the

plush seats and darkened rooms of the downtown movie houses, we were transported to

Europe or back in time. The women were glamorous and the men dapper, everyone was a

wit, and there was almost always a happy ending. We never imagined that the Wild West

was actually a movable set on a back lot, that each looming mountain was the backside of

the same Hollywood hill, or that the acres of picture-perfect New England snows were

manufactured under blue California skies by giant ice machines. Our lives grew as large

as those on the celluloid reels that filled the screen. We went to the movies nearly every

weekend.

On Saturday afternoons, Mother would load my friends and me into the car and

drive down to the Yucca Theater, where we would rush to the ticket line. The Yucca

showed mostly family fare or westerns. But we vaguely knew there was more to

Hollywood. Once, as soon as Mother had waved to us and driven out of sight, we raced

around to the other downtown theater, the Ritz, to watch the film *Blue Denim,* about

teenage pregnancy, a subject that was all but taboo in Midland. Carol Lynley, the star,

played a fifteen-year-old girl. She herself was only seventeen.

Boys and girls paired off early in Midland. Before elementary school ended, a

small frenzy had built around trading disks, flat circles engraved with our names. In the

sixth grade, I was convinced that a boy was going to ask me to trade disks with him.

After school, I dragged Mother to the Kruger Jewelry store to buy a gold-plated disk. He

never asked. Another boy, Robert McCleskey, did invite me to the Yucca Theater to see

Gone With the Wind and still remains one of our best friends.

By seventh grade, boys began calling for what we dubbed "Daddy dates." Girls

sat in the backs of the cars with their adolescent escorts while the boys' fathers drove. I

had one "Daddy date" after I turned thirteen, which not coincidentally was the year I

traded in my thick glasses for hard contact lenses that sat right on top of my blue eyes.

My date was Kevin O'Neill, whose brother Joe would be the one to introduce me to

George W. Bush almost twenty years later. Kevin invited me to a dance, and his father,

Mr. O'Neill, a wealthy oilman who had come to Midland from Philadelphia, drove us. By

age fourteen, chaperoning parents became increasingly superfluous. Fourteen was the age

when most Texas kids got their driver's licenses.

Regan Kimberlin was my best friend at San Jacinto Junior High, and she loved

being behind the wheel. She had raven black hair, green eyes, and a throaty laugh, and

she had attended almost every school in Midland, including second grade at Sam Houston

Elementary with George. Regan's mother, Wanda, was on about the fifth of her seven

marriages. She married and divorced Regan's dad two times. Indeed, Wanda believed in

divorce almost as much as marriage, and she moved with each tying or untying of the

knot. By the time Regan was in junior high, Wanda was married to Jerry Cooper, whom

she would marry and divorce three times. We thought Jerry was the perfect stepfather.

Jerry and Wanda had bought a red Thunderbird convertible for Jan, Regan's older sister,

in the hope of persuading Jan to annul her hasty marriage to Mike Morse, who in the

infinitely small world of Midland, was the son of Ann and Joe Morse, our next-door

neighbors on Princeton Avenue. Jan ignored the car and stayed married to Mike, and

Regan was given the keys to the Thunderbird. Regan had that Thunderbird longer than

Jan had Mike. Regan first took it for a spin when we were still thirteen years old and in

the eighth grade, before we got our official licenses. We used to drive around in that or in

her mother's pink Nash Rambler, a stubby car that we nicknamed "the pink pig."

After we got our licenses, all of my friends went out driving. We drove to the

three drive-in movie theaters that ringed Midland. Whoever was behind the wheel would

pull over before we reached the entrance, and half of the crowd in the car would squeeze

into the trunk to avoid paying the admission fee. After we parked, one of us would have

to sneak out and open the trunk to release the stowaways. We drove to the drive-in

restaurants, like Agnes's or A & W. Sometimes Regan and I headed out alone to Mr. X's,

on the dicier south side of town, where they served taquitos, steak fingers, and fried

chicken livers and where, as we grew older, we could smoke without being seen.

But if we wanted to be seen in Midland, we went to Agnes's. Friday and Saturday

nights now consisted of trips to the movies and Cokes at Agnes's. Agnes herself was a

strong, stocky West Texas woman with a broad back from bending over hot stoves and

steel gray hair wrapped in a knot on top of her head. Once I watched her raise her hand

and slap a boy across the cheek in the parking lot because she thought he was being

smart-alecky. But every night Agnes's would fill with cars. No one ever got out; we sat in

our seats and waited for the carhops and eased the wheels forward or back as new cars

pulled up and old ones drove off. Sometimes we went twice in one night. When couples

left, it was usually to go out in the country, to the dark, flat stretches of unpaved road past

the city loop, to park and then head back, so they could tell their parents the truth, that

they had just come from Agnes's.

We were lucky in Midland to have so many places to drive. In other, smaller West

Texas towns, there were no drive-ins or movies. Night after night, restless kids cruised

the town square, making endless loops around the local city hall and the courthouse.

No one ever thought we were too young to drive. At age thirteen, we attended

driver's education classes in the San Jacinto Junior High auditorium to prepare for the

written test. Some boys got cars when they turned fourteen, not because their parents

were wealthy but because they worked at jobs after school. They had '57 Chevys and old

Fords, whatever they found cheap or used. The rest of us simply borrowed from the

garages of our parents.

Around Easter of my fourteenth year, my mother lost the last of her babies,

another boy, this one too early even to name.

When he took my mother to the hospital, my father left her car keys for me. One

evening, I carefully backed Mother's Ford Fairlane out of our driveway and drove down

the side streets to Agnes's. I pulled in, placed my order, and then I had to move. That part

I was not prepared for. I managed to get the car into reverse, only to back straight into a

pole in the parking lot.

Chastened, I studied for my written test, making notes with my No. 2 pencils, and

I practiced in the car with my mother. She took me to the one place near our house where

the roads were guaranteed to be quiet, the Midland cemetery. I learned to accelerate,

brake, and turn among the somber rows of crosses and polished headstones, where the

paths were peaceful and the speeds slow, never once knowing what this place and a

single automobile could mean for my own future.

At age fourteen, I, like everyone else, got my driver's license.

If we weren't driving, we were trying to figure out other ways to get out of our

homes. Almost every weekend, I went to a slumber party. We were a gaggle of girls,

Regan, my friends Peggy, Jan, Beverly, Cathie, and the twins, Sharon and Susan, and we

thought we were sort of wild. In truth, we weren't wild at all. We wore loafers and bobby

socks and dresses or skirts and blouses or sweater sets to school and Bermuda shorts and

pants only on the weekends. Once, when Wanda moved Regan to Norman, Oklahoma,

for a semester, Regan came back with four perfect wool skirts and sweaters that had been

dyed to match. We were all very impressed. Girls, or at least my group of girls, started

wearing lipstick in the seventh grade, but there were rules. Gwyne Smith's mother had

decreed that the only appropriate color was Miss Ritz, a pale pink from Charles of the

Ritz. My mother would never buy Charles of the Ritz lipstick, and certainly not for a

seventh grader. I had a pink shade from the drugstore.

In the summers, Regan, Cathie, and I would sun ourselves by the pool at the

Ranchland Hills Country Club, where Jerry Cooper belonged. Ranchland was a bit farther

out, but the Midland Country Club was stricter. It wouldn't allow anyone by its pool who

wasn't a member. My mother silently threw up her hands at our quest to turn our pale

skin to ever-darker shades of bronze. She still drove with long sleeves and white gloves

even when the temperature pierced one hundred degrees, to keep the sun from marking

her hands and arms.

Girls in Midland didn't drink at all in high school. Boys only drank beer, when

they could get it, which wasn't that often. But we did smoke, holding our cigarettes out

the window and blowing out long, smooth streams of smoke, trying to look like 1960s

movie stars. It seemed that everyone smoked back then, except for my mother. My dad

smoked, and so did most of my parents' friends. Within twenty-five years, so many of the

women would be dead, their lungs, larynxes, and hearts giving out one by one. By the

time I was seventeen or eighteen, I was smoking in front of my parents, although once

when my father found a cigarette pack in the clutch purse on my nightstand, I

immediately swore that it belonged to my friend Cathie. I was adamant that it wasn't

mine. As Khrushchev sparred with Kennedy and the world contemplated a nuclear

missile exchange, we trailed around in pale gray clouds laced with nicotine.

Our parents' generation might have been glued to the radio for news and the

somber-toned voice of Edward R. Murrow from London, but in Midland, the radio and

later television were our gateways to music and our Edward was simply an Ed, Ed

Sullivan. I was not quite ten when Elvis Presley first sang and shook on *The Ed Sullivan*

Show, and I remember watching him at Gwyne's house. Her parents were out for the

evening, and we had a babysitter. The two of us were alone in her den, and when Elvis

got up and began to swivel his hips, we did too, shimmying as the King crooned and

danced on the grainy black-and-white screen.

We were raised on rock 'n' roll, and the adults didn't complain. Buddy Holly was

from Lubbock, and Roy Orbison was from another West Texas town, Wink, so we felt as

if the music was almost homegrown. Late at night, after Mother and Daddy had gone to

bed and all the local radio stations had signed off, I'd shut my door, prop open my school

books, and listen to Wolfman Jack play hits out of Nuevo Laredo or tune in to KOMA

Oklahoma City, whose signal carried across the skies at night on the AM radio, reaching

as far away as Wyoming and the Dakotas in the north, or west to Arizona, on the cool,

clear air.

I had some records, and I bought the Beatles' first American album when it was

released, but Regan was the one with what we considered a priceless collection of 45s,

which her mother boxed up and sold for pennies on the dollar at a garage sale once Regan

was grown and gone.

To be truly daring, we snuck out of the house on sleepover nights. We would

tiptoe out of a bedroom and quietly open the front door. The more daring kids might

climb out a window and drop down--no one ever had a second-floor bedroom and at most

you risked hitting a low bush. Then we would walk around the neighborhood streets in

our pajamas under the faint glow of the streetlights. When we went to Peggy's house, we

crossed over to the big Cowden Park, which had once been a buffalo wallow and now

became a lake when it rained, with frogs that called to each other deep into the darkness.

Some girls snuck out of doors and windows to go to their boyfriends' houses, and

some took their parents' cars as well. I never did any of that, although I did ride around

one time with my friend Candy after she put her parents' car in neutral and rolled it out of

the garage. She made it around the neighborhood on numerous nights until our friend

Mike Jones opened the car door as we pulled into the driveway. Candy kept driving and

smashed the car door into the side of the garage. The door closed on Mike's foot, and the

garage wall left a huge dent in the door. Candy sat there in total shock; until that moment

she had always gotten the car home without a scratch.

My one foray backing into the pole at Agnes's at age thirteen had cured me of any

desire to sneak our car out, and I was a classic only child who never wanted to disappoint

Mother and Daddy. My biggest acts of teenage bravery were trotting along Midland's

sidewalks in checked pajamas.

After San Jacinto Junior High, I should have attended Midland High, but instead I

went to the brand-new high school, Robert E. Lee, because we had moved again. Every

other school in Midland was named for a Texas hero or event, from Jim Bowie, Sam

Houston, James Fannin, Mirabeau Lamar, Davy Crockett, William Travis, and Lorenzo

de Zavala to San Jacinto and Alamo, for the famous battles against Mexico. Looking

back, there were likely a lot of reprobates in the Texas group, but they seemed so much

more distant from our own time and place. And of course, in Texas, they were venerated

and then some. As John Steinbeck once mused, "Like most passionate nations Texas has

its own history based on, but not limited by, facts." It is almost impossible to be raised in

Texas and not know that Texas was once an independent nation. To make sure that no

one in Midland forgot, we studied Texas history in the fourth grade and again for the

whole of the seventh, and every morning, we crossed under our heroes' names

emblazoned on the brick or concrete block of our school buildings. The only outside hero

was George Washington Carver, whose name adorned the segregated high school where

Midland's black students went. But now there was Robert E. Lee.

Midland had not existed during the Civil War, and it seemed both absurd and

wrong to name a school for a Confederate commander in the year 1960. At the time, my

mother told me that one school board member was adamant about calling it Robert E. Lee

and with a shake of her head just let it go. And I did too. No one I knew protested; it was

simply considered to be out of our hands. As kids, we lived in our own little world, where

we could ride our bikes wherever we wanted and sneak out in our pajamas because

Midland was a safe town and we were safe within its limits. Our parents were not afraid

for us to dash outside the minute school was over and play until the front porch lights and

streetlamps flickered on and it was time to come in and eat. We lived our lives in a kind

of easy oblivion and ceded the important decisions to the adults.

At Lee, they played "Dixie" at the football games, and we were expected to sing

when we heard the first chords. Our teams were called the Rebels, our annual was the

Rebelee. But it bothered me. It bothered me from the moment I went.

I went to Lee because Daddy had sold our house. It wasn't even for sale. One

afternoon, a real estate agent came to the front door and rang the bell. Daddy answered,

and the woman asked if she could buy the house. She had a client who was willing to

offer Daddy a very good price, and on the spot, Daddy said yes. It is the one time I

remember Mother being upset and disappointed. She loved that house and did not want to

leave, but we did. We packed up and moved to a spec house that Daddy had recently built

on Hughes Street and then, a couple of years later, to another home over on Humble

Avenue, the last house that Daddy ever built for us, our "nice" house.

It was in our nice house that one afternoon I answered a knock at the door.

Standing on the front step were two men in suits. They held up their badges and said,

"We're from the FBI." The next thing they asked was, "Is Harold Welch at home?" Daddy

was taking a nap, and I was quite nervous to go wake him. But I did. The FBI men were

in the process of "busting a bookie," as they put it, and they wanted to know if Daddy

could come downtown and help identify him. Daddy shook his head. "No," he said. "I've

only talked to him on the phone. I don't know what he looks like." The men thanked him

politely and left. Betting itself apparently didn't bother them.

Our Humble Avenue house sat at the intersection of Humble and Lanham, but it

was so quiet that if a car cruised down the street late at night, the low rumble of its engine

would wake me from a sound sleep. On Humble, Regan and I spent a lot of time in my

room, which stood at the end of the house, adjacent to the sidewalk and the street. At

night, when the streetlights began to glow, we would prop open the window--the same

one that blew in during a particularly fierce dust storm, spraying glass, sand, and grit all

over my room--and our boyfriends would tiptoe along the side yard to stand on the grass

and talk to us through the screen. One of my neighbors, Dick Taylor, preferred to shoot

out the streetlight with his .22 gauge hunting rifle and then amble over in the dark to

stand at the window and talk. Each time he shot it out, Mother would call the city and

say, "You need to replace the streetlight, somebody else has shot it out." But it was only

Dick with his .22. The city would put in a new light, and Dick would wait a week and

then shoot it out again. My parents made no real effort to investigate; they liked Dick.

And my mother was waging her own stealth battle with the lamppost. She had joined the

Audubon Society and eagerly devoured its magazine and mailers, which were crusading

against the pesticide DDT. Quietly around our blocks, bright yellow Ban DDT bumper

stickers began appearing on utility poles and light posts. Mother was hardly in a position

to turn Dick in. Still, I'm sure if I had ever crawled out that window, Mother and Daddy

would have done far more than make another call to the city authorities.

But living on Humble Avenue meant that I was no longer in the Midland High

School district, and from that, so much else changed.

All of Lee's home football games were held at the Midland High Stadium. I had

been going to the Friday-night games since I was a fifth grader at Bowie. There was

something thrilling about those Friday nights. Everyone went, parents and children,

people whose children had long since moved away, even people with no children at all. It

was football and Friday night in Midland. I would watch neighbors stream out of their

houses and walk down the streets or more often see lines of cars snaking toward the

parking lot. The stadium rose up out of the ground like a great bowl, and everyone had a

place in it. Kids did not sit with their families; they sat with their school and their grade.

The fifth and sixth graders from all the city's elementary schools sat in the bleachers on

the elementary end in one end zone. The other end zone was reserved for the junior high

students, in seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. The high schoolers sat together in the

middle of the stadium; the adults sat around them. If anyone bothered to look down at

either end zone, it seemed as if the whole stadium was levitating, because most of the

kids didn't sit still, they spent the entire game jumping around and talking. The boys

would race to the top row and pretend to leap off the top of the stadium or would flutter

their arms and kick their legs as if they were about to fall off into the inky dark night. All

around them, the girls had their eyes trained on the boys. I think Midland and Lee had

good football teams all the years I was there, but I can't recall who won or lost each

game.

By high school, the game watching changed. A boy might invite you to a game,

but most girls hoped they would be dating a football player down on the field. If you

were going with someone on the team, he would send you a big mum with his number on

it; for Midland High, it was a big gold chrysanthemum with the player number twisted in

purple pipe cleaners and adorned with long purple and gold ribbons. Lee High School

players sent white mums with their numbers in maroon pipe cleaners and trails of maroon

and white ribbons. Football players' girls pinned these chrysanthemums to their jackets or

sweaters so everyone could see them. For several years, I dated a boy who played for

Midland. He couldn't afford to send me a chrysanthemum for every game, but he did

have one delivered for the big contests, and I pinned it on my clothes and then brought it

home to wilt for months afterward on my bulletin board.

The biggest game was between Midland and Lee high schools at the end of the

season, but otherwise on Friday nights, the two teams played the Odessa schools, Odessa

Permian and Odessa High, and teams from San Angelo and Abilene and other towns in

the district. The visiting teams would ride in big buses with convoys of cars, fans who

came to cheer for their school.

Midland hardly ever has a fall. Occasionally, we would get just the right mix of

rain and cool to turn the red oaks a bright, rich russet, but most of the time, summer with

its shimmering heat would linger well past October. Then suddenly, around November

17, the cold would barrel in on a tight, hard wind, and the grass would freeze. There was

very little in-between. But because Midland sits at the edge of the desert, the nights, even

in the baking heat, would be cool. It was possible to actually feel cold when you went to a

football game, sitting under that enormous, star-laced sky. The blazing stadium lights

couldn't dim the vast display of stars overhead, an arc of light beaming back down upon

us.

I loved school. I was a good student with good grades. I learned to write in a style

that Mrs. Stallings, my senior English teacher, called the Dr. Guthrie style, after the

sermons of Dr. Guthrie, the minister at our First Methodist Church. You stated your

argument, found examples to support it, and then summed up your point all over again. I

took mostly honors courses and earned five points for my grade point average if I made

an A, four if I made a B. I was always in Honors English, where we read the early 1960s

definition of the classics: *Jane Eyre, Ethan Frome,* Shakespeare's plays, Charles Dickens,

and George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. But I loved to read books, all the time, in any class.

During the hours we spent on math or science, I would perch my textbook on my desk to

look particularly studious, while behind its thick cover I was hiding my latest book. In

one case it was *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* which for 1963 Midland was quite risque.

Before I was out of junior high, I had devoured William Goldman's *The Temple of Gold*

and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. I looked for any opportunity to read. I also

took a course that was reserved for the top students in the school called History of

Western Thought. It was a philosophy course that started with Plato, and at the end of the

school year we had to write a big paper, like a thesis. I loved it, reading Plato and

Socrates and St. Augustine in the middle of West Texas.

I was not the most popular girl in high school, but I got asked to dances, which

had moved from the San Jacinto Junior High cafeteria, where the dance committee would

hang green and white crepe paper streamers from the ceiling and girls by the dozen

would troop off to the bathroom or mill about at the edge of the linoleum floor, to the

newly built youth centers adjacent to Lee or Midland High. They were real dances, with

hired bands and couples twisting and turning on the dance floor. Before each dance, most

boys sent a corsage of roses or gardenias, sometimes orchids if the date was very special.

After the girls had worn them, they tacked the corsages to droop and dry on the bulletin

boards that were staples in every bedroom and that held such other prized possessions as

the folded-up paper notes that were passed in class and occasional pictures of friends. I

pinned my dance corsages next to my shriveled gold football flowers.

Mother was the one who always thought "what if," and the "what if" invariably

came back to the same thing, what if she and Daddy had never sold the big house on

Princeton Avenue? What if we hadn't sold that house and had just stayed there? If we had

stayed on Princeton, I would have gone to Midland High rather than Lee, and then in her

mind everything would have been different. Everything was the night of November 6,

1963, two days after I had turned seventeen.

That night, I picked up the car keys and my purse. I stopped in the kitchen to tell

Mother and Daddy good-bye. They were standing around the breakfast bar with some of

their friends, the smoke drifting up in slow, lazy curls from the ends of four or five halfsmoked cigarettes. I was smiling. Everything felt unbelievably light and happy, and

someone called back, "Have fun." I walked through the utility room door as I had done

hundreds of other times, pulled the car out of the driveway, and headed off down the

smooth street to my friend Judy Dykes's house. She was one of my good high school

friends; her dad had been a friend of Daddy's from Lubbock. We had made plans to go to

the drive-in movies, though in typical seventeen-year-old fashion we hadn't bothered to

look in the paper to see what was playing. We decided that we would drive by and see

what was there. So I left Judy's house and headed to the loop, which back then was a little

country road with no streetlights circling around Midland.

We talked as I drove along the pitch-black road. I knew in my mind that

somewhere ahead was a right turn for Big Spring Street, where the drive-in theater was,

because the loop almost dead-ended at Big Spring. Beyond the turn the asphalt stopped,

and there was nothing more than a trail of unpaved dirt and dust. Most drivers turned

right, toward town. I knew there was a turn, but where that turn was seemed very far

away until suddenly, off in the middle of a field, I glimpsed a stop sign with the corner

beam of my headlights. At that moment, I heard Judy's voice: "There's a stop sign." And I

just couldn't stop. I was going along, a little below the speed limit, which was fifty-five

miles an hour. The next thing I knew, I was in the intersection, and immediately in front

of me was another car. It came rushing out of the darkness, and I was right upon it,

without a second to turn the wheel. All I heard was the horrible sound of metal colliding,

the catastrophic boom that occurs when two hard pieces of steel make contact.

The next thing I knew, I was rolling on the ground, in the dirt, holding my head. I

had been thrown from the car with a force so great that I didn't even hit the asphalt on the

road but was tossed clear over to the hard, dry ground alongside. In those awful seconds,

the car door must have been flung open by the impact and my body rose in the air until

gravity took over and I was pulled, hard and fast, back to earth. I have no memory of

being thrown or of raising my hands to my head; it must have been an automatic reaction.

Eventually, I stopped rolling and simply lay there, completely stunned. And then slowly

Judy got out of the car, and I got up.

My face was banged up; I had a cut on my knee that bled in a long red gash, and

my ankle was broken, although no one knew it until several days afterward. The doctors

didn't find it in the emergency room. In the distance, I saw headlights, and someone else

stopped. It was a family from Midland, and they came over and put their arms around

Judy and me. We stood there, embraced by them. But I knew we were not the only ones

in the crash. There was another car.

The whole time, I was praying that the person in the other car was alive too. In

my mind, I was calling, "Please, God. Please, God. Please, God," over and over and over

again. Then more cars pulled up, and someone must have gone for help, because

eventually we heard the wail of sirens and glimpsed the rotating, flashing lights of

ambulances and police cars.

One driver who arrived was a man I recognized, Bill Douglas, the father of my

very good high school friend Mike. The Douglases lived up beyond the loop, in a small

neighborhood about four long city blocks past that corner of Big Spring Street. We

considered it almost a country neighborhood because there was nothing around the

houses except the bottom tips of ranches and open land. But, on a quiet November night,

that block of houses with their long, wide yards was close enough to hear a thunderous

crash at the edge of Big Spring. And I saw Mr. Douglas lean over whomever had been in

that other car.

Judy and I were waiting to get in one of the ambulances, and Judy kept saying to

me, "I think that's the father of the person who was in the other car." And I said, "No, that

couldn't be the father. That's Mr. Douglas."

I was still pleading with God as I lay in the emergency room, waiting for the

doctors to stitch my knee. The lights were bright, and I could hear the scurrying of the

nurses' flat-soled shoes on the floor, but no one was paying attention to Judy or to me

because our injuries were cuts and bruises, scrapes and strains. I was still thinking, lying

there, that Mike could not have been in that other car. And then, on the other side of the

hospital curtain, I heard a woman start to cry, and I knew that it was Mrs. Douglas. But I

couldn't stop asking God, over and over in my head, to please keep this other person

alive.

It was Mother and Daddy who told me that Mike had been driving the other car,

after I was home, in my own bed. But by then, I already heard the sounds of his parents'

choked sobs ricocheting in the far recesses of my mind.

November 6 was a Wednesday, but we were out that night because Thursday was

a school holiday. Mike was on his way into town for a date with Peggy, whose house

backed up to Cowden Park, where the old buffalo wallow was, and where we would

climb out the window and sneak around in our pajamas. He had dated Regan for a long

time before that. He was a handsome boy with a beautiful smile, and he was a top athlete

at Lee. He was not my boyfriend, although for a decade some in the press have claimed

that he was. But for years, he was my very close friend. I have images of Mike in my

home movies, the movies that Charlie White, who lived behind us on Estes Avenue, took

every Christmas because the Whites owned a little movie camera. The Whites were good

friends of Mike's parents, and that's how Mother and Daddy knew them, long before we

were in high school. I can still see a gap-toothed Mike in at least one of those old

Christmas movie reels, where years later, everything looks slightly tinged with blue or

brown.

All through high school, Mike and I were good friends; we talked on the phone

for hours, and Mike's circle of close friends included nearly all of my own. And so it was

unbelievable to me that it was his car in that almost always empty intersection. It was a

small car, a Corvair Monza, Detroit's version of a compact, economy car designed to

compete with the Volkswagen Beetle. It was sporty and sleek, and it was also the car that

Ralph Nader made famous in his book *Unsafe at Any Speed*. He claimed the car was

unstable and prone to rollover accidents. A few years later, the National Highway Traffic

Safety Administration went so far as to investigate the Corvair's handling, but it didn't

reach the same grim conclusions. I was driving my dad's much larger and heavier Chevy

Impala. But none of that would ever ease the night of November 6. Not for me, and never

for the Douglases.

So many lives were wrecked that night at that corner, which was known as a

particularly dangerous place. Already that year, two other people had lost their lives in

crashes where the loop met Big Spring Street. After Mike's death, the city did install a

much bigger stop sign and posted warnings. But it was too late for us.

A dangerous intersection, a less than safe car, and me. I don't see well, I didn't

ever see well, and maybe that played a part. Or perhaps it was simply dark, Judy and I

were talking, and I was an inexperienced driver who got to a corner before I expected it.

I didn't have to tell anyone what happened. Every single person in Midland knew.

Regan had been with Peggy at a school dance performance rehearsal, and then both had

gone home to wait for their boyfriends. Regan was waiting for her boyfriend, John.

Peggy was waiting for Mike. Regan's dad called her to say that I'd been in an accident,

and Regan and John rushed to the hospital. By the time they arrived, I had already been

sent home, so they drove to my house. They knew that Mike had died when they pulled

up to our curb. My mother met them outside and told Regan that I didn't know Mike had

been in the other car, so Regan and John sat with me as I lay in bed, with this horrible,

unspoken truth hovering in the air. After they left, Mother and Daddy told me.

Immediately afterward, Mother and Daddy's friends showed up, and I'm sure it

was the same at the Douglases'. Betty Hackney, Johnny's wife, came over and stood at

the sink and washed dishes because so many people came and everyone brought

something to eat or stopped to eat something. People from our church came. Mary White

was at our house almost every day. All of Mother and Daddy's best friends came. The

next morning Mother and Daddy and Mary and Charlie drove over to see the Douglases. I

never knew what they said, and they never told me. I only knew that they had gone.

My friends were brokenhearted, but Regan and Jan, Candy, and a bunch of Mike's

friends and my high school boyfriend, now a college freshman, came over to our house to

sit with me. That is the amazing thing about Midland. So many people could be utterly

devastated and could wish that this terrible thing had never happened, and they were and

they did, but they still found it in their hearts to be supportive of me.

I did not go to the funeral. It was held that Saturday, November 9, at St. Mark's

Methodist Church. I wanted to go, and I told Mother and Daddy that I wanted to. But

they wanted me to stay home. No doubt they were trying to protect me, thinking that it

would be too hard on me, and on the Douglases, if I were to attend. Whatever their

reasons, I did not have a chance to decide. The next morning, no one rapped on my door

to awaken me. When I finally opened my eyes, the service had started, and it was too

late. So I didn't go, and I never contacted the Douglases. Like everyone else around me, I

thought that they wouldn't want to see me, that there wasn't one thing that I could say to

them that they would want to hear.

Pretty quickly no one mentioned the accident. My parents never brought it up.

And neither did my friends, with the exception of Regan. I remember when the story of

the crash appeared in the press during the 2000 presidential campaign, two of George's

cousins, with whom we're very close, were shocked. I'd never told them. I didn't even get

to tell my own daughters. A Texas Department of Public Safety officer on our protection

detail did that when George was governor. He assumed they already knew.

But when one of Barbara's and Jenna's best friends committed suicide during their

junior year of high school, I insisted that we go over right away to see his parents. I tried

to do for them what I couldn't do for the Douglases.

Once I became a mother myself, I thought more about the Douglases. I began to

understand how devastating their grief must be. On some level, only when I had children

could I begin to comprehend the enormity for them of losing Mike. Only then, when I

could imagine that it was Barbara or Jenna.

Looking back now, with the wisdom of another forty-five years, I know that I

should have gone to see the Douglases; I should have reached out to them. At seventeen,

I assumed that they would prefer I vanish, that I would only remind them of their loss.

But in retrospect, I think all of us--not only me but all of Mike's friends--should have

been more solicitous of them. We weren't. We were so close to leaving Midland; in a few

short months we all went off to college. We did not grasp what a difference a simple visit

would make. But having friends now who have lost their own children, as well as

knowing the parents of Barbara's and Jenna's friends who have died--the boy who was

killed coming home from the Texas-Oklahoma game their freshman year in college, the

girl who died with her date when their car skidded off the treacherous, winding roads

heading back to Washington and Lee University in Virginia, the same little girl who had

shown Barbara and Jenna around school and had become their first friend when we

moved to Austin--I know from these parents that they like being with Barbara and Jenna.

Having their child's friends remember them, and also remember the child they have lost,

gives them another way to remain connected to that adored child who is forever gone.

To them, those children will always be seventeen or eighteen years old, a little bit

older than I was in 1963. Their futures exist only in the ache of imagination. I see that

now, but I did not see it then.

In the aftermath, all I felt was guilty, very guilty. In fact, I still do. It is a guilt I

will carry for the rest of my life, far more visible to me than the scar etched in the bump

of my knee. At some point most people in these situations come to make a mental peace

with the fact that it was an accident. And that it cannot be changed. There is no great

clock to unwind, no choice that can somehow miraculously be made again.

But I can never absolve myself of the guilt. And the guilt isn't simply from Mike

dying. The guilt is from all the implications, from the way those few seconds spun out

and enfolded so many other lives. The reverberations seem to go on forever, like the

ripples from an unsinkable stone. There are the hard, inner circles wrapping around

Mike's parents and Mike's sister, whose lives were changed and ruined. His parents

grieved until their deaths. And then there are the more distant ripples, encompassing all

of his friends and my friends. It is a grief that they had as well.

Since I became a public person, I've gotten many letters--letters from strangers,

from mothers, aunts, cousins, teachers, and friends--asking if I could write a note of

encouragement to a young driver who had been in a terrible accident. Each time, I've

answered. I've told them that, although you will never get over what happened, there will

come a time in your life when you can move on. And I've always suggested that they talk

to the people whom they love. Or that they speak to a counselor or a spiritual or pastoral

adviser. Sometimes the letters are to kids in situations where someone was drinking, but a

lot of them are just like I was, an inexperienced, seventeen-year-old driver who didn't

have a good concept of where I was in town, who didn't know how far I'd gone in the

dark or how close I was to the intersection.

But while I give this advice in my letters, I didn't do any of that. West Texas in

1963 was a time and a place where no one would have gotten a counselor. People in

Midland did not think of psychologists or psychiatrists. I don't remember if our pastor,

Dr. Guthrie, stopped by. He must have come to talk with Mother and Daddy. But I have

no memory of it, no memory of anything but my own thoughts about that dark November

evening.

Most of how I ultimately coped with the crash was by trying not to talk about it,

not to think about it, to put it aside. Because there wasn't anything I could do. Even if I

tried.

I lost my faith that November, lost it for many, many years. It was the first time

that I had prayed to God for something, begged him for something, not the simple

childhood wishing on a star but humbly begging for another human life. And it was as if

no one heard. My begging, to my seventeen-year-old mind, had made no difference. The

only answer was the sound of Mrs. Douglas's sobs on the other side of that thin

emergency room curtain.

Over dinner one night my dear friend Jim Francis shared a story of a mutual

friend. This man had lost his son to suicide. One day in the summer of 2009, he was

sitting in a men's shop in Dallas trying on a pair of shoes when a small boy, a special

needs boy, came racing up to him and nearly knocked him off the bench with a hug. The

boy's mother hurried up, apologizing profusely, and pulled her son away, only to have the

boy launch at the man again. As she started to apologize a second time, the father looked

up at her and said, "Please don't apologize. It's been a long time since I've had a hug from

a boy."

Jim cried as he told it. So did his wife, Debbie, and so did George and I. George,

who lost his little sister Robin to the ravages of leukemia, and I, who will forever carry

with me those four or five seconds on that blackened Midland road, and lovely Debbie

and Jim, whose youngest son nearly drowned when he was two but who didn't die. He's

in his thirties now, but mentally he is like a newborn baby. They have lived for thirty-four

years with the grace of accepting, of not asking "why me?" of not seeking to blame, or

becoming cynical, or being lulled into bitterness. Life's largest truth may be that everyone

faces tragedy. Learning to accept those tragedies, learning to accept that life is riddled

with events large and small, events that you may cause or that may happen to you, events

that you can never control, is perhaps the hardest lesson of all. In that wrenching fact, I

have faith that no one is ever alone.

In the months ahead, Lee was full of memorials for Mike. He was remembered in

the school annual. His teammates picked out a little metal cannon to salute him in the

school courtyard. At the end of the school year, Regan and a couple of Mike's friends

went to visit his parents. Mike's mother asked them all to sign her copy of his annual, as

they would have done had he been alive.

I stayed home from school for a week with my broken ankle and blackened eyes,

but by mid-November, I was back at class. I walked the hallways with stiff tape wrapped

around my ankle. Almost as soon as I returned, Kim Hammond, one of Mike's best

friends, a boy who had been a pallbearer at his funeral, called and asked if he could

nominate me for the Rebelee Court, which crowned the princesses and queens for Lee's

senior program. (Midland High's homecoming court was called Catoico, for cattle, oil,

and cotton, the three industries of Midland.) I said thank you and yes, although I felt

about the farthest possible thing from a princess or a queen. It was a sweet gesture of

unspoken forgiveness, and I have never forgotten. Quietly, I went back to my books. My

mother started thinking about what might have happened if my father had never sold the

Big House. My father worried about whether there had been anything unsafe about his

Chevy Impala.

But I already knew that the "what ifs" are fruitless. It's a futile exercise to go

through the "Oh, if I only hadn't done that, then that wouldn't have happened."

Two weeks and two days later, on November 22, President John F. Kennedy was

riding in a preelection motorcade through Dallas when he raised his hand to wave to the

crowd and a perfectly aimed bullet whistled through the air under that all-enveloping

Texas sky.

Traveling Light

As a fourth-grade teacher at John F. Kennedy Elementary School, Houston,

Texas, 1970.

We knew something was wrong the moment the wooden door with the glassed-in

window closed and our teacher, Mr. Carter, walked to the front of the room. Standing

there, slump-shouldered, with a catch in his voice, he uttered the unimaginable words, the

President of the United States had been shot dead in Dallas. Most people can remember

whatever quiet, mundane task they were doing on that day when they heard the news that

John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. I was seventeen years old, sitting in my senior

year History of Western Thought class at the precise moment when our own history

shuddered and changed. I sat at my desk surrounded by the writings of some of the

greatest minds that humanity has ever produced, and all I could feel was mute shock,

utter horror, and a numbing disbelief. It was a Friday afternoon.

That Sunday, with the TV droning in the background, Daddy came rushing in the

side door from the carport while Mother was fixing lunch to tell us that someone had shot

Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's assassin. The report had just come over the car radio. He

stood there in the kitchen shaking his head and saying how tragic it was, because now no

one would ever really know what had happened. There would always be speculation. We

would never be certain of the truth.

For the rest of that day and the Monday following, I lay on the couch in our den

and watched the entire presidential funeral ceremony, the inky mourning crepe looking

somehow even blacker on the grain of the black-and-white TV. I was aching from Mike

Douglas's death. Kennedy's assassination entwined itself with my own sense of tragedy

until all I felt was a smothering sadness. I could never imagine meeting a president, but I

had given Kennedy's book, *Profiles in Courage*, to my high school boyfriend for

Christmas the previous year. Now I was watching President Kennedy's flag-draped coffin

roll by.

My mother sat glued to the ceremonies as well. She would have seen Jackie

Kennedy, her face obscured behind a voluminous black veil, and known that the first lady

had already buried two babies, a stillborn girl and a premature boy, Patrick. That day,

along with the country, she was burying her husband.

There is a story, told forty years later by one reporter, that at a single Midland

restaurant, Luigi's, an Italian pizza and pasta place where the tables were covered in red

and white checked cloths, lunchtime diners applauded when they heard the news of

Kennedy's murder. I never heard that. Not at the time, not in the years afterward. Neither

did any of my friends. The not so subtle implication behind the story was that Midland

was fiercely conservative and more than a little racist, although many of the United

States' greatest civil rights gains would come under a Texan, Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Certainly Midland in the early 1960s wasn't a racially integrated town. As in most

of Texas, much of the South, and indeed the rest of the country, the schools were

segregated, and there was an undercurrent of racism. The Midland of my early childhood

had a few separate water fountains, each porcelain basin clearly marked "white" or

"colored." But they were soon taken down. The prejudice that remained was subtler, a

back-room or bridge-club type of prejudice, inflicted behind closed doors. No one burned

crosses or scribbled epithets or deployed water cannons. And if some people spoke badly,

most assuredly not everybody did. I never heard my parents talk in a racist way. When

George once used a derogatory word that he had overheard, his mother smacked him for

speaking "filth." In the early 1960s, there was a small African-American section in

Midland but not yet a sizable Hispanic one. I didn't have any black friends, but I didn't

have any way to make black friends, and they had no way to make friends with me.

And I always knew that on the horrible night of November 6, the first car that had

stopped to help and the family that had come running up to wrap me in the protective

cover of their arms was African-American.

Ultimately, it took federal intervention--starting with the 1954 Supreme Court

ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* and continuing through years of school closings,

National Guard encounters, and federal marshals dispatched to open barred doors--to

change the schools. Attitudes changed even more slowly, because this wasn't just how

Midland was, it was how much of the United States was, even places that had once been

bastions of abolition, like Boston. Change had to come from the top, not the bottom.

But little, isolated Midland was also more diverse than it appears to many of the

people who find it so easy to condemn.

When it came to class, we were far more integrated than other parts of the

country. Midland was a working-class town. Most of the people who made money in the

oil business came from working-class roots. Quite a few of them had grown up with close

to nothing. Even the men from wealthier families, like Mr. Bush or the Philadelphia-bred

Mr. O'Neill, who had driven the car for my first "Daddy date" with his thirteen-year-old

son, Kevin, had moved out to the West Texas plains determined to prove themselves.

They didn't carry with them the trappings of moneyed East Coast homes. That kind of

showmanship would not have sat well in midcentury Midland. The children of

roughnecks and roustabouts went to the same schools and played on the same teams and

were friends with the children of geologists and engineers and landmen and ranch

owners, both those with oil leases on their properties and those with nothing but dry

grassland. When people retract their noses ever so slightly at the mention of Midland, or

West Texas more generally, I am reminded that there are many ways to denigrate a place

or demean a person.

In the years that followed, my friends and I watched the civil rights movement

unfold, and we embraced it. We had already learned not to judge a man or a woman

based on the place that he or she called home.

And so, on those late November days, we watched and grieved in Midland as an

Irish Catholic from Boston was buried at Arlington National Cemetery outside of

Washington, D.C.

It cost twenty-five dollars a semester to attend the Texas College of Mines and

Metallurgy when my mother enrolled, in the fall of 1936. She waited until the night

before final registration to ask her father for the money. It was a bleak seven years into

the Great Depression, and twenty-five dollars was a significant sum. There were women

who took jobs making sandwiches in soup kitchens just so they could be guaranteed one

meal a day. Education was a luxury. My mother barely worked up the nerve to say

anything. In the morning, Hal Hawkins handed over the twenty-five dollars, likely

counted out in part in quarters, nickels, and other small change. After that, his daughter

never asked him for school fees again.

When my mother went off to college, she could no longer afford to live at home

and ride the bus some fourteen miles from the upper valley down to El Paso and back

each evening, so she boarded with a family in town, taking care of their daughter in

return for a room and food. The father worked for the Royal Dutch Shell oil company.

Mother once chaperoned the little girl, Charlotte, all the way to New York on the train

and then down the length of the East Coast on an oil company tanker--"the biggest ship I

had ever seen in my life," she recalled--to Aruba. Charlotte's parents insisted that Mother

pay her own way to New York, and she had to "scrounge" to gather enough to cover train

fare. By 1938, she had dropped out of school altogether to earn her way in the world. My

father had long since quit his own college in Lubbock.

But they never doubted that I would attend college. When I was in the second

grade, my father proudly announced that he had bought an insurance policy designed to

pay for my college when the time came. He walked into our brick house on Estes Avenue

and said, "I bought this college plan for you." When I actually went to college, that little

plan was worth only enough to cover one semester, but my parents were always

determined that I have a college education. That was what so many of our parents in

Midland wanted, a future beyond the best of what theirs had been.

And it was all the more remarkable that my father kept his promise. By the time I

left Midland for Dallas, in 1964, an oil bust had struck. Some 4,500 people ultimately left

the city. Homes went unsold or were foreclosed. My father did not build a single new

house the entire time I was away at school.

After traversing what seemed like half the state of Texas with my parents looking

at schools--the sprawling University of Texas campus in Austin, Southwestern University

in Georgetown, Texas, and all the way over to Sophie Newcomb in New Orleans--I chose

Southern Methodist University in Dallas. By East Coast standards, it was a young school.

The same year that it was founded, 1911, the venerable Yale University in Connecticut

turned 210 years old. But SMU looked old. Its buildings were brick, and the centerpiece,

Dallas Hall, had massive white columns that appeared to have stood in exactly that spot

since the time of King George III. Unlike in the University of Texas system, many of

SMU's students came from other states; it drew its applicants from up and down the

corridors of the Midwest. And I liked the fact that it was in Dallas, home to my uncle

Mark and city of innumerable visits, especially each fall to the Texas State Fair. I had

first become enchanted with SMU in the seventh grade, when I read a biography of Doak

Walker, SMU's legendary football running back--not at all an odd choice for a girl from

Midland, where we breathed football each autumn. Walker won the Heisman Trophy in

1948; the Dallas Cotton Bowl used to be called "The House That Doak Built." But my

girlish crush was not on the running back, it was on his campus, and I nurtured it for six

years. I would also be going with a group of Midland girls, including Gwyne Smith, my

friend from elementary school.

The fall of 1964 on college campuses around the country was not the spring of

1968 or 1969. Far from being hotbeds of radical activity, most schools were bastions of

youthful irresponsibility, worlds of brimming punch bowls and the nervous social banter

of night after night of sorority rush in antebellum-style houses that looked like backdrops

for *Gone With the Wind*. In our dorm rooms and sororities, we had curfews, 10:00 p.m.

on weekdays, midnight on weekends. House mothers came to do bed checks.

Irresponsibility could occur only during preset hours. We dutifully followed the rules,

having no sense of the seismic fault lines that trembled beneath our feet.

At SMU, the boys were clean-cut. The girls didn't wear pants, only dresses or

skirts, which grazed the knee. The miniskirt was not invented until 1965, and it was worn

in Great Britain first. I can still remember how daring it felt to wear jeans to class when I

was a senior; I was the only one in denim in the entire seminar room. During my

sophomore year, when I went to a Bob Dylan concert, I wore a little wool skirt suit that I

had bought in El Paso the summer before with Mother at the Amen Wardy department

store. My date wore a jacket and tie, and so did all the other boys around him. The crowd

booed when, after the first half of the show, Dylan came back and reset the amplifiers to

switch from folk music to hard rock 'n' roll. They wanted him to remain a folk singer.

"The times they are a-changin'" didn't yet apply to North Texas.

I lived in the women's dorms in my first years and joined a sorority, Kappa Alpha

Theta, in my second. My best friends were now a new orbit of girls, Jane Purucker and

Bobbie Jo Ferguson from Kansas City, Janet Kinard from Abilene, Mary Brice from

Snyder, Texas, a West Texas oil town far smaller than Midland, and Susan Englehart

from Corpus Christi. I was only seventeen when I started college, at a time when many of

the girls I knew aspired more to getting married than to attending their own university

graduations. SMU was coed; it was not a suitcase school, like so many women's colleges

of the time, where girls packed up and headed off each weekend to marathon excursions

with boys, trying to make a good impression as the clock ticked down the seconds until

Sunday afternoon. But we had girls who pined after loves on other campuses and

hundreds of others who were searching for lifelong mates among the fraternity boys on

our own.

In the beginning, I didn't know whether to be social or studious. I spent too many

nights on dates at the El Toro Room, and my first-semester grades were embarrassing.

Not since the fifth grade at Bowie Elementary, when I received a C in social studies, had

I been so devastated. Back then, my pediatrician, Dr. Dorothy Wyvell, had ordered me to

come home and lie down in the afternoons to recover from a bad cough. The result was

that I missed weeks of social studies and ended up with a C. Worse than my own

disappointment was the thought that I had failed Mother and Daddy. Now, eight years

later, that failure was magnified. I called home, cried, and apologized. It was not just my

own opportunity that I was squandering; it was theirs as well, the opportunity that they

had given to their only daughter, out of love and without demands or strings. After that, I

became, if not a model student, then certainly a very serious one. And I had one

tremendous advantage. I had already studied many of the classics during my senior-year

course in Western thought in Midland.

One of my favorite classes was a course in children's literature taught by

Harryette Ehrhardt. Ironically, my mother had already studied children's literature in

Midland when I was in junior high as part of the local college extension program. One

night a week, while she headed off to discuss children's classics, I would fix dinner and

silently roll my eyes. Now I saw that some of history's greatest writers had penned their

best works for children. I was enchanted by the words of E. B. White, Madeleine

L'Engle, the Brothers Grimm, and my childhood favorite, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and by

the way Dr. Ehrhardt unraveled the layers upon layers of meaning in what others saw as

merely whimsical turns of phrase. The class was demanding, and I was one of the few

students to make an A. I already knew that I wanted to be a teacher.

Having a chosen profession was a rather new concept for women in the South.

Women had always worked, doing the backbreaking labor of running a home, cooking,

cleaning, hefting piles of sopping wet laundry onto the line to dry. And many women did

work in jobs before they married or if they were widowed young. A few in Midland, like

Mary White, worked for most of their married lives, although the oilmen whose offices

they ran rarely promoted them beyond the typewriter and steno pool. Most girls, though,

were schooled to dream of being wives and mothers. Their curious minds were largely

self-taught--my brick-laying grandmother with her intricate garden or my mother with a

book open in her dishwater-dry hands. When Betty Friedan published *The Feminine*

Mystique, in 1963, their lives, my life, and those of my friends were not upended. What I

see now in retrospect is that so many of my friends broke barriers not by intention but

simply by doing.

With the exception of my uncle Mark, who had gone to medical school, I was the

first person in my family to earn a university degree. And even Mark had not technically

finished college. When he was accepted to medical school in Arkansas, he just left Texas

Tech rather than spend another semester's tuition during the Depression. Mine was not an

immigrant story, aside from Eva Louise LaMaire, but simply the story of families who

had moved beyond the bare-bones life of small Arkansas and before that Mississippi and

Kentucky farms, where families made do with a cow, a garden, and a clutch of chickens.

But in the mid-1960s, the present quickly became all-consuming.

At SMU, we stayed up late at night smoking cigarettes and engaging in

discussions about the larger meaning of life, great debates without any final resolution.

They were our own private versions of the heated debates being waged around us,

debates that we watched, but sometimes with a bit of remove. When I entered SMU, the

Vietnam War was not yet raging. America's ground war in the jungles did not begin until

the spring of 1965. Even as the conflict escalated, SMU was not an early hotbed of

antiwar protests, although the school did briefly have a chapter of Students for a

Democratic Society. And boys I knew in Midland or at SMU were among those who

enlisted or were drafted. One of our friends, Buddy Hensley, spent hours shirtless in the

steamy Southeast Asian heat, filling giant barrels with the chemical defoliant Agent

Orange; another, Mike Proctor, was a helicopter pilot. Both survived the war and remain

our close friends. The only casualty I knew from Midland was Bob Zonne, the big

brother of one of my high school classmates, Bill Zonne. Among our friends who fought,

he was the one who did not make it home. His name is inscribed on the Wall in

Washington, D.C.

What we felt much more keenly in the mid-sixties was the civil rights movement.

In 1961, when I was just a high school sophomore, SMU students had already picketed

local barbershops and movie theaters that practiced segregation, and even though SMU

had few African-American students, the student body as a whole had voted strongly in

support of a completely integrated campus, where all admissions would be color-blind. I

was proud that SMU had the first African-American football player in the Southwest

Conference, Jerry LeVias. In two years, he went from being pummeled on the field by

other players long after the whistle had blown to winning the Fort Worth Kiwanis Club

Award for Sportsmanship and becoming an all-American player in his senior year. When

LeVias came to SMU, fellow coaches had told Coach Hayden Fry that they "would never

allow" a black player on their team.

The civil rights cause gave us the words to talk about the racial divide that still

stubbornly clung to our cities and towns, even our own homes. At last, I had a language

to understand what I had intuitively known, that naming Lee High School in 1960 for a

man who a century before, in 1861, chose his state of Virginia and his slaveholder ties

over abolition while Midland's black students were still assigned to George Washington

Carver High School was wrong. Suddenly everything was open for question: why my

father's black friends were the men who worked the stove and the grill at Johnny's Bar-BQ or why the only black women the rest of us knew were the ones who cleaned homes.

I was not a placard-waving protester. But the scenes from the Alabama marches

or the riots that left Detroit and Newark in flames cemented my desire to do what I could,

and that was to teach in an inner-city, minority school. I wanted to work with children

who had been left out and, too often, left behind, simply because of the color of their

skin. When I taught, I always asked to be placed in what were called "minority schools."

In 1964, when I arrived on the SMU campus, panicked students would ask the

student health center, located only a few doors down from my dorm, for amphetamines to

stay awake late to study for exams. One of my girlfriends even experimented with a

California turnaround, what truckers used to stay awake on the road. She didn't sleep for

three days. It was perhaps a frail line separating that kind of officially sanctioned selfmedicating from the other, illegal drugs that would start to creep onto college campuses.

By 1968, marijuana had arrived at SMU, although none of my Midland friends ever

smoked pot. And the few girls at school who did try it would never admit it, in the same

way that they would never reveal private details about their boyfriends. These were

considered deep secrets, which girls kept to themselves alone.

Even if there was no "Summer of Love" at SMU, we did know that there was

another world being unleashed beyond our white columns and redbrick walls. A few

students played tracks from the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* or "Light My Fire" by Jim Morrison

and the Doors, although at parties we danced to the sounds of what is now Motown but

was then called "soul music," the Supremes, the Isley Brothers, and Cookie and the

Cupcakes. Once, during my senior year, I was curious to see what real hippies looked

like. My roommate, Jane, and I dressed in jeans and bare feet and hung beads from our

necks. Then we headed off to Lee Park, one of the largest parks in Dallas and named for

Robert E. Lee, to look for the fabled hippies. But there were none--instead, everyone else

in the park turned to stare at us, imagining that we were the hippies who had come to

commune with nature in the middle of the city.

One thing we did in our cute skirts and bubble hair, which we teased and sprayed

and rolled on big, bristly rollers clamped tight with pins, was drink, even though we were

underage. All the fraternity parties served alcohol, especially in lethal blends of spiked

punch, and we drank, way too much, and smoked, even in class. By the early 1970s, our

drinking would seem almost passe. By then, the drug culture had overwhelmed college

life. Graduating in the South in 1968 put us just slightly ahead of the wave. But in time,

alcohol would prove to be equally devastating for far too many of my friends.

At SMU, the wild boys were not the drunken fraternity brothers who would go on

to become bankers and businessmen; they were the boys who drove motorcycles and who

rebelled against anything that smacked of authority. Yet even they were not as freed from

convention as it seemed. Chuck, the long-haired boy with the devil-may-care smile, who

rode a motorcycle and dated Bobbie Jo, volunteered to go to Vietnam. Another of his

biker friends once stole a suit, which he wore to his seminary interview for the Episcopal

priesthood. He got in. But there was a James Dean-style restlessness that gripped our

college years, a desire to throw off one by one the conventions of our parents and our

grandparents. The gross injustices underpinning the need for the civil rights movement,

the pat explanations that "certain groups had to earn their rights," in order to justify the

sins of segregation, and subtle racism made many of the previous generations' values

seem suspect and shallow. A few of the more vocal among us rejected everything.

Indeed, most of the class of 1968 had grown up during a period of unprecedented

abundance. We had never known a great depression or a global war that ran hot rather

than cold. Our parents' sacrifices had shielded us from these things. But now our own

generational discontent had produced a highly combustible equation. I remember sitting

in our sorority house on the last day of March 1968, when Lyndon Johnson announced

that he would not run for reelection. We watched largely in silence; there was no

collective gasp of regret.

At my commencement, just over a month after Martin Luther King was

assassinated and a few weeks before another bullet felled Bobby Kennedy, SMU's

president, Willis Tate, implored students not to abandon rational thought and judgment,

saying, "We live in a day when contagious hysteria and social pressures can completely

anesthetize a person's ability to reason," and adding, "In times of rapid change, the old

may be destroyed along with the decayed. There are some time-tested, eternal values."

Not everyone participated in the upheaval of the late 1960s. Many of the girls I

knew, including most of my Midland friends, were getting on with the next phase of their

lives. They had become engaged or had already returned home to their childhood

churches for their weddings. I fully expected to be married by the end of my senior year.

I thought about it whenever I caught sight of a beaming bride preparing to walk down the

aisle under the serene cream spire of Perkins Chapel at the center of the SMU campus. I

even dated a young medical student at the start of my senior year and assumed for a while

that I would settle down with him. But I graduated with no ring on my left hand and no

immediate prospects for one.

For my graduation gift, I wanted to see Europe. Midland was still firmly in the

grip of an oil bust, so my parents looked for something affordable. The answer came in

the form of my uncle Mark, who was taking his family on a fourteen-day trip, stopping in

ten different countries. He invited me to come along. My cousin Mary Mark and I saw a

huge swath of the continent at a rapid clip. What captivated me was the age of all the

places, stones that had been quarried, cut, and laid over a millennium ago, sculpture

carved by hands that could not imagine a wild grassland where Indians had pitched

animal skin tents and stalked buffalo. I would look up and see stained glass that had

already survived multiple wars before Midland even had a name or an old railroad boxcar

to hold its mail.

My first job, if you could call it that, was making coffee for my parents in the pot

at home--I got a nickel if I made coffee for Mother and Daddy every morning. I also set

the table and made my bed, and I kept a little chart of all the chores that I had done, a

kind of grade-school time clock, I suppose. My other bits of gainful employment were

teaching swimming at the Midland public pool and working as a counselor at summer

camps. One summer, Jane Gray and I opened our own three-hour morning camp,

advertising it on mimeographed flyers and holding it in her mother's Jack and Jill school.

Now I was about to set foot in a fourth-grade classroom, with nothing more to prepare me

than a few months of practice teaching at one of Dallas's most elite elementary schools.

Bradfield Elementary, where aspiring SMU teaching students went to practice, wasn't

even in the Dallas Independent School District; it was in the separate city of Highland

Park. My second-grade practice classroom did contain one surprise: the football legend

Doak Walker's seven-year-old son. He was a shy boy; his parents had been divorced for

several years. His quiet presence was a reminder that not even childhood idols remained

unchanged; Doak Walker was no longer a young man charging toward the end zone, and

I was no longer dreaming of college from the shelter of the seventh grade.

I had decided to remain in Dallas, at least for the moment. Susan, Janet, Bobbie

Jo, and I rented a little postwar-style garden apartment amid a cluster of two-story brick

buildings with white trim and stairs. Our building sat at the end of the block, only a few

hundred yards from the train tracks. Susan used to dash across the rails to go visit her

boyfriend, Mike, who lived on the other side. All I needed was a job, preferably a job that

didn't involve a long drive. Ever since the accident, I preferred to cede the driving to

friends like Regan, who loved being behind the wheel. I did not want a long commute,

and I turned down jobs at two Dallas schools because they were too far away. Finally, the

personnel director for the school system called back and said, "Well, Miss Welch, how

about the school on your street?" And I said, "Oh, good, that will be perfect." So every

morning, I walked to Longfellow Elementary, two blocks from my apartment.

Longfellow had been built amid large, gracious two-story homes that sat back

from the roads on acres of manicured green lawns, but very few of the local residents sent

their children there. Many were older people whose children had long since grown. But

the well-to-do also largely avoided the Dallas Independent School District. Those who

didn't settle in places like Highland Park sent their children to private academies instead.

The students at Longfellow, a solid two-story, tan brick school, were bused in from other

neighborhoods, close to downtown. Most came from a predominantly African-American

neighborhood near the new Parkland Hospital, which had replaced the old redbrick

building where John F. Kennedy was rushed after he was shot.

I loved my students. I was just twenty-one when I entered that fourth-grade

classroom, and my students in so many ways taught me. I had only twenty in my class, a

luxury at a time when many public schools had upwards of thirty or forty students in a

single room. My classroom was on the first floor, with windows all along one side

because there was no air-conditioning. We opened the glass and hoped for a breeze. It

was in that school in the September heat, as sweat glued my blouse to my back, that I felt

the physical demands of teaching, six hours or more on my feet, standing at the

blackboard, on the recess blacktop, or in the cafeteria as students navigated the lunch

lines and downed their meals. And I had to keep their attention, by myself, alone.

The realities of an elementary school classroom are far from the Hollywood

romance of tweedy academics or wisecracking professors. The movies can condense an

entire school career into a little over two hours. That doesn't take most teachers even

through the morning. Teaching is, even for those who love it, at times isolating. It

happens behind closed doors, one adult navigating the needs and complexities of twenty

or more children, twenty or more entirely different personalities. We are not, in truth, so

far removed from the days of the one-room schoolhouse. As much as teachers may talk to

other faculty members, they don't go out to lunch or briefly laze by coffeepots or

watercoolers. Elementary school teachers must calculate when their classrooms are

subdued enough for them even to escape to the bathroom. But I never found it boring,

and as I got my bearings, it became deeply rewarding.

My education degree had not prepared me, I quickly learned, to teach reading.

Like many new teachers, I followed the textbook teacher guide provided by the school

system. But that did little to make words and stories come alive. It was when I began a

story hour after lunch that my passion quickly became the children's. We read books like

Where the Wild Things Are, and the children would pretend that the characters had come

alive in the classroom. We saved a space in the corner for a web for Charlotte, the famous

spider in *Charlotte's Web*. Wilbur's pen was a nearby locker. Bunnies lived in supply

closets; monsters screeched on the blackboard. Every book came to life, and the children

would gaze eager and wide-eyed, leaning forward as I turned each page. I had them write

poems and created books of their poetry, each bound between two cardboard sheets and

secured by a ribbon threaded through hand-punched holes. I would save up the funny

things they said and call home to regale Mother and Daddy, who laughed at the other end

of the phone.

Four decades later, the antics of my students would become the inspiration for my

first book, a children's story, *Read All About It!,* which I penned with my daughter Jenna.

Like me, Jenna would begin her career as a teacher in inner-city schools, hers in

Washington and Baltimore. In *Read All About It!,* as in my first classroom in Longfellow,

cherished storybook characters magically came to life.

By the end of that year, though, I was ready to leave Dallas. I had lived there for

five years; most of my close college friends were now drifting off to other cities. And I

had never lived outside of Texas. I was twenty-two and restless. My students were

moving on to the next grade, and it seemed time for me to move as well. One of my

roommates, Bobbie Jo, wanted to head east, to Boston, which to our imaginations seemed

a world removed from the Texas and Kansas plains. She planned on getting a job at

Filene's department store; I would just get a job. We hopped in my car and started across

the country, stopping in Nashville and other spots to visit college friends. When we

arrived in Boston, neither of us knew one single person to call or where to look for an

apartment. After three days, we left, this time driving south to Washington, D.C.

In the nation's capital, we rented a cheap room at the YWCA and washed our

clothes in the sink and hung them on lamps and curtain rods to dry. Bobbie Jo applied for

a position at Garfinckel's department store. I went to Capitol Hill and interviewed with

my local congressman. George Mahon had represented Midland since 1935. He was a

lawyer from Lubbock who had been born in northern Louisiana. In 1969, he was almost

seventy years old. I called his office and got an appointment.

One late July morning, I walked through the marble-halled warren of

congressional offices, where earnest young men and women labored behind piles of

paper on their desks. I sat down in a leather chair in Congressman Mahon's office,

wearing my nice dress, my purse perched on my lap, as he looked over my resume and

asked me if I could type or take shorthand. I could barely type; I had taken a quick course

during summer school but hadn't paid much attention. I didn't think that I needed to type

because, in a burst of intellectual snobbery and a bit of feminism, I had decided that I

wasn't going to be anyone's secretary, and I wasn't going to waste my high school class

time on typing lessons. Congressman Mahon then asked me if my father would consider

sending me to secretarial school to learn how to type professionally and take shorthand. I

thought about what my father had already spent to send me to SMU and said no again.

And Congressman Mahon gently suggested that, without being able to do either, I really

wasn't qualified for a position in his office. Had I been a typist, however, in the summer

of 1969, I might very well have become a congressional staffer in Washington.

Bobbie Jo decided to remain in Washington. Her boyfriend, Chuck, was in

Vietnam, and she couldn't bear to spend the year in Texas, seeing her friends arm in arm,

hand in hand. She wanted to, as she put it, "go into exile." I left her to board in a rooming

house, with her job at Garfinckel's, and drove back to Texas, alone, driving for hours

during the day and sleeping each night in neon-lit motels that dotted the highway. My

SMU friend Janet Kinard had moved from Dallas to Houston. All summer, she had been

calling and saying that she needed a roommate. I repacked and set off for Houston. When

I got on the Katy Freeway bound for downtown, traffic came to a halt. A wrecked truck

was blocking the freeway. People rolled down their windows and got out of their cars to

sit on the roofs and the hoods because it was August and it was hot, that hot, humid air

from the bayous and the Gulf of Mexico that hangs over Houston the way it does over the

Mississippi Delta to the east. I sat on the roof of my car listening to people mill around

and talk until the authorities had cleared the accident and we could move again. I hoped it

wasn't some sort of an omen that, as I drove into Houston to begin the rest of my life, I

got stuck on a freeway and waited for hours in the August sun.

Dallas was a newer city. As late as 1860, it had a mere 678 people. By that same

year, Houston had briefly been the capital of Texas and was already sporting the

beginnings of a port and a rail system, with more than four hundred miles of track laid in

the surrounding ground. But over a century later, in 1969, Houston seemed younger and

brasher. The city's buildings were a hodgepodge across the skyline. There were no zoning

regulations, so it was possible to have a gleaming skyscraper on the lot next to a funny

old house that had stood in that same spot for decades. I moved in with Janet and joined

the ranks of young, professional women by getting a job at a brokerage house.

Prior to that job, my closest brush with high finance had been when I was around

fifteen. One Saturday morning, Daddy put on his nicest suit and tie, Mother wore her best

dress, I spent hours with spray and hard rollers to get my hair to billow up over my head,

and we drove downtown to a photography studio for a formal family portrait. After he

saw the pictures, Daddy smiled his big, broad grin and said, "I think I look like a

Philadelphia banker." His idea of a Philadelphia banker came from the old black-andwhite Katharine Hepburn movie *The Philadelphia Story*, but for someone from Lubbock,

Texas, it was the look of success.

I, however, was not cut out to be a banker. I was dreadfully bored at the brokerage

house and longed to return to the classroom. Within a couple of months, I was teaching

again, taking over the class of a teacher who had left to have a baby. My school was the

John F. Kennedy Elementary School; my class was the fourth grade, and our principal

was Mrs. Gunnells.

At first, I hated it. I was starting in the middle of the school year, the classroom

was in chaos, and after my sweet class in Dallas, I was unprepared for this group of nineyear-olds. My students were wild, screaming, talking back, hiding erasers, wadding up

pieces of paper and lobbing them across the room. They were determined to see just how

far they could push a new teacher. Every weekend, I would get the "Sunday sads"; I

dreaded returning to my classroom on Monday morning. When I passed construction

workers with their hard hats and lunch pails, I envied them. They did not have raucous

children to deal with, particularly two rambunctious brothers, whom I thought of as the

"dynamic duo." The older brother was in my class; his younger brother was a first grader.

Whenever the first grader grew bored, he would sneak into my classroom, jump out from

behind the desk, and scream, "Boo." All the children would laugh, and whatever tenuous

control I had asserted to get them to pay attention would vanish all over again. Gradually

I started to read the signs of restlessness and learned to spot the little brother before he

reached the door. I would send one or both brothers on an errand to deliver a note or

sharpen pencils, giving them a chance to get up and move around.

The Kennedy School sat on a busy commercial road; trucks, cars, and buses

rattled outside the windows. The students, nearly all of whom were African-American,

lived for the most part in small, run-down houses behind the school building on narrow

side streets, which eventually dead-ended alongside warehouses and the train tracks. The

houses were tiny and old; they had clapboard siding with peeling paint and loose asbestos

shingles on the roofs. Parked in front were rusting cars, whose tire treads dug into the

yards. Most of the parents worked, but there were few opportunities available to them.

Poverty, lack of education, even alcohol abuse lurked behind too many doors.

It was only the mothers who came to school; the dads never did. Most of our

students qualified for free lunch and a breakfast, if they got there early enough. For a few,

these were often the only regular meals they had. They would arrive in the morning,

bellies rumbling, and pile their plates with food. After lunch had passed, they endured the

slow burn of hunger until the next day. I can't imagine how they navigated the holidays

and weekends. One of my students was so hungry that he could not stay awake; he spent

part of the day with his head resting on his desk. He was a talented artist, able to draw

lovely and elaborate pictures. Once, his mother came to a meeting at school, and I

gingerly mentioned that her son spent a lot of time sleeping at his desk. She told me very

matter-of-factly that she left quite early in the morning, and the kids "just had to make it

on their own." It was not her choice; there was just no alternative. I don't remember that

she ever came back to school after that. We were used to partly empty back-to-school

nights and the ghosts of parents who failed to sign the notes we dutifully sent home with

their children. But in the early 1970s, teachers were not expected to reach into families'

lives. We could only try to teach our students before they moved on. Corporal

punishment was still in use in the Texas school system; I had seen it at Longfellow. I

could have spanked a hungry child or smacked his knuckles with a ruler, and the school

would have been obligated to take my side.

There were some students we did help. At Longfellow, I had a petite girl who was

constantly jumping up and down and trying to attract attention. Then we did the eye chart

and found that she was just like me: partially blind. She was the way I would have been if

I hadn't had glasses. I moved her to the front row, and the school nurse sent a note home

saying that she needed glasses. Her mother refused to get them, but the nurse did not give

up. Eventually, the child got glasses. And John F. Kennedy Elementary, despite the

pressures of the neighborhood, was a well-run school. The faculty, white and AfricanAmerican, was dedicated; many had taught for years. But too often at other city schools,

teachers were put in rooms with twenty or more students and simply told "good luck."

I've always been struck by how teachers were the last professionals to get phones on their

desks, and how hard it has been for them to stay in contact with parents. Today, of

course, they have e-mail and cell phones, but for years, parents and teachers in huge

urban school districts coexisted in a perpetual state of mutual isolation.

Not all contact was good, however. Once a student's mother stormed into my

classroom and yelled at me over something she thought had happened to her son. The

entire class watched with their mouths hanging open. I was stunned, but Mrs. Gunnells,

the principal, quickly came to my defense--she was very strict with the parents too. From

the wild fourth grade, I moved to the second grade and had the younger brother of my

dynamic duo, the little boy who had so loved sneaking in my classroom door. I stayed

with that class for third grade, which meant more story time after lunch, but it also meant

that every subject I was weak in, like math, my students were weak in too. They became

very dependent on one adult, me. For much of their fourth-grade year, they told their new

teacher, "We don't have to do that, because Miss Welch didn't say that we had to."

While I was figuring out how to be a teacher, I was also learning how to be a

grown-up in Houston. I knew Houston from summer trips with Mother and Daddy. One

of my college boyfriends had been from Houston, and even Regan's mom, Wanda, had

moved there.

In our little apartment, Janet and I would host dinner parties and fix King Ranch

chicken, a famous casserole of tortillas, cheese, chicken, and three different cans of soup.

Janet's mother had sent her off with the Abilene Junior League cookbook, and we thought

it was a good cookbook, since most recipes called for several cans of creamed soup. We

hosted our dinner parties, inviting our boyfriends and their friends, with everyone

crammed onto our few pieces of furniture, eating from plates perched on their laps. We

went to the Athens Bar & Grill, an old Greek place along the ship channel. At the other

scarred tables were sailors from the far corners of the world; their ships had docked in

Houston. We drove to Austin for football games and headed west to Laredo, on the banks

of the Rio Grande, one of the oldest border crossing points between the United States and

Mexico. We went to bars to drink and restaurants for dinner, because there is only so

much King Ranch chicken that anyone can eat. A couple of our friends had sailboats, and

we would spend afternoons blowing about on the waters of the Gulf of Mexico,

traversing the foul-smelling, oil-covered Houston ship channel to sail. Another close

friend of mine from SMU had an old family beach house that we visited out on the

barrier island of Galveston. It was built of weathered wood and sat up on stilts to give it a

slim chance against the fierce hurricanes and blanketing tides that would periodically rip

through.

In Houston, after my brief flirtation with working in a brokerage house, I dated a

stockbroker while, one by one, my friends settled down. Regan, who had bounced from

house to house and even from state to state during her growing up, was one of the first to

say "I do," with Billy Gammon, who worked in his family's insurance business. Then

Peggy married Ronnie Weiss, and Janet married Fred Heyne. Right after their wedding,

Regan and Billy moved east, to New York, so he could train at a top insurance firm. In

the fall of 1970, my stockbroker boyfriend invited me to New York, where he had

meetings, and we went out to dinner with Regan and Billy. The next day, my boyfriend

took Regan and me, in our fashionable miniskirted dresses, down to Wall Street. We

walked onto one of the brokerage trading floors with him to get a glimpse of high

finance. I saw a sea of desks and agitated men grabbing at ringing phones, until some guy

yelled out, "Hey, who are the bimbos?"

We thought it was hilarious. Regan was a newlywed and newly pregnant. As for

me, how many bimbos are able to moonlight as second-grade teachers and school

librarians?

In Houston, I lived in the place for singles, the Chateaux Dijon, a sprawling,

block-long apartment complex with several swimming pools and turrets rising on each

side. With its sloping gray roof, it had pretensions of being a brown-brick Versailles. My

suite was a revolving door of four roommates, including Jan Donnelly, one of my

Midland friends, who moved home in 1972 to marry Joey O'Neill. One summer, I spent

nearly every day at the pool reading the classics of Russian literature, traveling through

the frigid, snow-laden novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky in the swampy heat of

Houston, where by midmorning you could break a sweat simply by stepping outside.

Reading and books were my passion, and I began to think seriously of enrolling in

graduate school for library science. Also, as much as I loved Houston, I wanted a change.

Like my parents moving from house to house, I had uncovered a similar restlessness,

from teaching to setting off for the East Coast, moving to Houston, working in a

brokerage house, going back to the classroom. I had so many options that I was seeking

an anchor to ground myself. Here my married friends had it almost easier; they had

already made their choices, and a quadrant of their lives was settled. I was determined to

settle on a job, and I wanted to be surrounded by books.

I applied to the library science program at University of Texas and was accepted.

But before I left for Austin, I wanted to take two of my favorite students from Kennedy to

AstroWorld, an amusement park near the baseball stadium. My boyfriend, Ralph, and I

arrived on a Saturday morning to pick them up. One of the boys was waiting, all dressed,

with his sister; their mother obviously hoped that we couldn't resist an outing for the two

of them. And we couldn't. We put both in the car and headed over to the other boy's

house. He opened the door in his underwear and couldn't manage to get dressed while we

were there. He was nine and going into fourth grade. We could hear his mother in the

back of the house, but she never came to the door. I hugged him good-bye with an extra

squeeze. There were many kids like him. The disarray of their parents' lives repeatedly

spilled over into their own.

Three decades later, in 2003, a couple of days before Christmas, the John F.

Kennedy Elementary School found me again. I was sitting in a television studio in

Washington, D.C., with the then host of NBC's *Meet the Press*, Tim Russert. We were

taping his Christmas show, and the other guest for the morning was Caroline Kennedy,

the daughter of the president. The red lights on the cameras were lit, and their giant eyes

were swiveling just out of sight in the set when Tim announced, "In 1969 and the early

1970s, you taught at the John F. Kennedy School."

And I turned to Caroline Kennedy to say that I had once taught at a school named

for her father.

My first apartment in Austin was a hand-me-down from my friend Bobbie Jo,

who had come back to Texas after her year of self-imposed exile. She had left the world

of department store retail to return to school to earn a graduate degree in education. Like

me, she had spent that first year out of college teaching in Dallas.

The apartment was on the second floor of an old wood-frame house. I had to walk

up a metal fire escape that groaned and clanged to reach it. Once when I stepped into a

tiny storage space under the eves, my leg sank through the cheap Sheetrock into the

apartment below. Bobbie Jo left behind a kitten from her cat's litter. I named her Dewey,

for the Dewey decimal system, a library staple. My home was now two rooms, a living

room in front, a bedroom in the back, and a slim pass-through kitchen in between. I

painted the cabinets cobalt blue. My painting jobs were never as good upon completion

as they were in my imagination. My furnishings were secondhand pieces from junk

shops.

The library school was located in the Harry Ransom Center on the UT campus, a

treasure trove of rare manuscripts from Shakespeare's First Folio to manuscripts by the

Bronte sisters and John Keats and the page proofs from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I was

learning about the conservation of books in a place with some of the most beautiful

pieces of literature in the world.

In January of 1973, the day after Richard Nixon was inaugurated for his second

term, Lyndon Johnson died in his bed at his ranch. His flag-draped coffin was brought to

lie in state at the Johnson Presidential Library on the UT campus. I was one of thousands

who lined up to file past the casket of "our Texas president." One of my library

professors had wept that day in class, saying, "President Johnson made it possible for me

to get the money to go on to graduate school." Lady Bird Johnson and her daughters,

Lynda and Luci, stood at the entrance, shaking hands with everyone who walked through

that afternoon. I extended mine, never imagining that someday we would meet again.

After I got my degree, I returned to Houston. My plan was to work in a public

library, which would have a far more extensive collection than a school. I envisioned

working in the main, downtown branch, where I could help readers and researchers and

where I might meet an eligible man on my lunch hour. I was offered a post in the

Kashmere Gardens Neighborhood Library, in an African-American section of Houston,

sandwiched between a rail line and an industrial building corridor. Instead of

businessmen looking for mystery novels, I helped families find books, and as soon as

school ended, we were overrun with children who had no place else safe to go; I was their

de facto caregiver. I read stories and devised activities, and I began to visit the

neighborhood elementary schools to lend them library books for their classrooms. When

the library was quiet, I read. Inspired by my mother and Lady Bird Johnson's love of

wildflowers, I devoured books about landscaping. I read every book in the library with

advice about how to quit smoking, and I read stacks of literary classics. One of my library

colleagues invited me to join her women's consciousness-raising group, and I did. We

talked about sisterhood and read still more books, including *Sisterhood Is Powerful* and

works by Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer.

But I missed Austin. I missed being able to gaze up at the edge of the Texas Hill

Country, where at dusk the sun cast a violet crown around the rising land. I enjoyed

Austin's small space, its lake and trails. And I missed working in a school. In the summer,

I quit my job in Houston and returned to Austin, to a tiny apartment in another old,

converted house near the downtown, and began applying for jobs. Regan and Billy had

also moved to Austin from New York, and Regan and I slipped back into the easy flow of

friendship that had been the compass of our teenage lives. Indeed, I was in Regan's

house, borrowing her iron to press my skirts and watching television on the afternoon

when Richard Nixon resigned the presidency.

Countless other afternoons, I would head to Regan and Billy's around five o'clock

and watch as Regan cooked dinner; I really learned to cook in her kitchen. Billy often

invited friends over, and we would eat and then I would head home. Other nights we

wandered to Armadillo World Headquarters to hear country music or rock 'n' roll. Austin

in those years billed itself as the anti-Nashville, showcasing music without the corporate

side, and the Armadillo was the central symbol of its musical underground. Once, I took

my parents to eat in the Armadillo's beer garden, where Daddy ran into Johnny Hackney's

daughter, Mandy. The shocked look on her face told me that I was one of the few people

to ever take their parents anywhere near the Armadillo World Headquarters.

I had a new job working in a library, this time as the school librarian for the Molly

Dawson Elementary School, in a largely Hispanic neighborhood. Now my day was spent

with children and books, and each class was my much-loved story hour. For many small

children, there is a fine line between reality and fantasy, and it's easy for them to cross

back and forth, just as little boys trot off to face imaginary bad guys in their Superman

capes. Books and their stories help children do just that. I wanted these children, like the

ones at John F. Kennedy, to dream of possibilities beyond their web of city blocks and

brick school walls.

Unlike other urban schools during that era, Dawson was lucky enough to have

music, art, and physical education teachers, along with a librarian, and we were the only

educators who had a chance to work with every student in the school. But we went a step

beyond that. Dawson's music teacher came up with the idea of applying for a special

grant to develop and teach an entire interdisciplinary curriculum based on the nation's

bicentennial. We taught our students about American history not simply with textbooks

and time lines but through the music, art, and literature of the Revolutionary period.

During gym, the students played Revolutionary-era games and learned colonial dances.

We used grant money to take the children on field trips to the historic sites of Laredo and

San Antonio. Many of our kids had barely been out of the confines of greater Austin.

My life had found its routine: work in Austin, visits to Midland a few times a

year. Although while at Kennedy I had spent the summer of 1971 taking a University of

California course in England, living in Oxford, where I studied the schools in Bath and

Exeter and took quick jaunts out to the English countryside, now my summer vacations

consisted of a week or two of visiting Mother and Daddy and trips around Texas to visit

friends. I was back on the flat asphalt highway between Austin and Midland, bisecting

the geography of Texas, the Big Empty, as it is often known. And I was thirty years old.

For at least a year, my friend Jan Donnelly's husband, Joey O'Neill, had been

telling me that he wanted to introduce me to one of his friends. Jan had gone to Lee High

School and had lived with me in Houston at the Chateaux Dijon. After spending a few

years in San Francisco, Jan and Joey had come home to live in Midland. Joey was

working in his dad's oil business, and his childhood friend George Bush was working as

an oil landman, scouring county courthouse records for land that might be leased for

drilling wells. Joey talked up George every time I stopped by to visit with Jan.

I was in no rush. I had a vague memory of George from the seventh grade, almost

twenty years before. I knew that his dad had run for Senate and lost in 1970, when I first

moved to Houston, and I assumed that George would be very interested in politics, while

I was not.

It was late July, one of those high heat days when, come dusk, the sun had, as

Willa Cather wrote, "left behind it a spent and exhausted world." I put on a blue sundress,

drove the car around the corner, and walked up to the door of Jan and Joey's brown-brick

town house. Even the roof was a cedar-shake brown. The cicadas were droning, and

overlaying their vibrating wings was the steady whir of air conditioners to keep the

baking-hot houses cool. Joey was at the grill. It was not some elaborate party; it was just

the four of us--Jan, Joey, George, and me--sitting out back, eating hamburgers. We

laughed and talked until it was nearly midnight. The next day, the phone rang. It was

George saying, "Let's go play miniature golf." And so we did, with Jan and Joey tagging

along as our chaperones.

The miniature golf course is one of the prettiest places in Midland. It was built

among a veritable forest of old elm trees, which had grown tall and graceful even in the

West Texas ground. We played golf under the stars and laughed again. Then I went back

to Austin, and George started visiting on the weekends. Sometimes he would fly over on

a Friday night, or he would drive, but he came every weekend, except for the very end of

August, when he left for Maine to see his family. Bar Bush loves to tell the story that

George spent exactly one day in Kennebunkport that summer. When he called my

apartment, she says that "some guy answered, and he raced for a plane and flew right

back down."

I returned to the library at Dawson and worked all through September. By the end

of the month, George had asked me to marry him. We had been dating only six or seven

weeks but our childhoods overlapped so completely and our worlds were so intertwined,

it was as if we had known each other our whole lives. I loved how he made me laugh and

his steadfastness. I knew in my heart that he was the one. I looked at him and said yes.

That Sunday night, when George arrived in Midland, he headed to Humble Avenue to

speak to my parents. A week later, early on a Sunday morning, George and I drove to

Houston for his niece Noelle's christening. Jeb and Columba Bush had a little house in

Larchmont, a neighborhood just past the Chateaux Dijon. The senior Bushes and their

good friends Susan and Jim Baker were already there. I said hello to the Bakers first, and

then George took my hand and led me to meet his parents. He introduced me with the

news that we were getting married.

After lunch at the Bushes' home, George's dad pulled out his pocket calendar and

looked over each weekend that fall. In a few minutes, we had picked a wedding date:

November 5, 1977, one day after my birthday, one day before the anniversary of the

awful accident, and only about three weeks away. There was no time even to order

printed wedding invitations. Mother wrote and addressed all of ours by hand.

I gave my two weeks' notice at Dawson and went wedding dress shopping with

Regan in Austin. I had been in a number of large Texas weddings, where the brides wore

long, white gowns and elaborate, lacy veils and had acres of bridesmaids. George and I

wanted a very simple celebration. I bought my dress, an ivory silk skirt and blouse, at a

store called Maharani's, where most of the clothing came from India or Afghanistan. I

would carry a bouquet of gardenias and pin gardenias in my hair. We had no groomsmen

or bridesmaids and invited only our immediate family and close friends, about seventyfive people, a very small wedding by Texas standards.

Far more nervous than either the bride or the groom were Jan and Joey O'Neill.

Joey and Jan had dated for years before they got married. Neither had dreamed that their

invitation to dinner would lead us to the altar in a mere three months. And perhaps it

wouldn't have if Joey had introduced us when we were growing up in Midland, or when

George and I had lived on opposite sides of the sprawling Chateaux Dijon in Houston, or

at almost any other moment prior to that night. But at that particular moment, on that

warm summer night, both of us were hoping to find someone. We were not looking for

someone to date but for someone with whom to share life, for the rest of our lives. We

both wanted children. We were ready to build an enduring future.

Those were the facts of our lives when we went to dinner that night. It was the

right timing for both of us.

Of course, not everyone in Midland agreed.

As I was packing to leave Austin, Regan and Billy were selling their house. A

week before the wedding, the mother of a friend of mine from Midland came to see

Regan and Billy's house. She was thinking of buying it for her daughter. She didn't

recognize Regan, but Regan recognized her and said, "We're going to be in Midland next

weekend. We're going to Laura and George's wedding." And without a second's

hesitation, this woman said to Regan, "Yes, can you imagine? The most eligible bachelor

in Midland marrying the old maid of Midland?"

Regan was speechless. But I thought it was funny. After all, I am four months less

two days younger than George.

The movers loaded up my few things. After the last box was stowed, my cat,

Dewey, and I began the drive that I had never quite imagined making, back to live in

Midland. Right outside of San Angelo, I came upon a few scattered trees lining the edge

of the road. Now, on the verge of November, the frost had already settled on the land, and

their leaves had fallen and blown away. Trunks and branches stood dark and empty

against the sky. Suddenly, from one naked tree, a great mass of winged birds lifted up,

feathers pulsing, air swirling as they rose. I slowed and watched in silence as they beat

their migratory way south, then glanced back at the unremarkable tree that had extended

its branches for rest and refuge. The sight was like a beautiful wedding gift on the long

road toward home.

We were married on a Saturday morning at the First Methodist Church in

Midland, the church I had gone to all my childhood, where I was baptized as a baby,

where I had learned to sing in the choir, and where my mother still went every Sunday.

Methodist weddings are brief, and ours was particularly so. There were no bridesmaids to

add a few extra minutes as they walked down the aisle. It was perfect for the "old maid"

and the "eligible bachelor." The rehearsal dinner had been held the night before in the

windowless basement ballroom of the new Hilton Hotel. Bar and George Bush had

hosted it, and the menu was chicken and rice. When dinner was served, my mother

blanched. Our wedding reception was to be a post-ceremony luncheon at the Midland

Racquet Club the next day, and Mother and the caterer had settled on chicken and rice.

Mother and Bar had never thought to compare menus. The next morning, Mother called

the caterer at the crack of dawn to see if something could be changed, pasta instead of

rice, anything. But the meal was already in motion, so our guests ate chicken and rice all

over again.

The morning after my thirty-first birthday, I stepped into the chapel on my father's

arm. George was waiting at the altar. The night before, when George stood to give his

toast, he'd wept. George and his father are deeply sentimental men. In years to come, to

others, the cool remove of television would frequently obscure the depth of their caring,

how much and how deeply their own hearts open. George Herbert Walker Bush didn't

even try to give a toast. Only Bar spoke.

That morning the stained-glass windows sparkled with light, casting pretty

patterns over the simple wooden chapel pews. It was, I later learned, exactly thirty-one

steps down the aisle and into the rest of my life.

We chose the beaches of Cozumel, Mexico, for our honeymoon. We drove from

our wedding luncheon to Mother and Daddy's house to pick up my bags. On the

driveway, we posed for our last round of wedding photos. Mother was our photographer,

and she was so nervous and nearsighted that she would hold up the camera, think she had

taken a picture, and then hold it down toward the driveway to advance the film. When

they were developed, all of our honeymoon departure photos were shots of the driveway

and the tips of Mother's dainty feet.

We arrived at the Midland airport for our flight to Houston, only to find the entire

Bush family--parents, brothers, and sister--plus all our guests from Houston waiting for

the same afternoon plane. It looked as if the Bush entourage was following us all the way

to Mexico for our honeymoon. But they disembarked when the plane landed in Houston.

We went on to Mexico City and then the next morning to Cozumel, once a thriving

Mayan enclave that for centuries was nearly deserted. Pirates sailed its waters, and

Abraham Lincoln apparently toyed with the idea of purchasing it to serve as a home for

freed slaves. In 1977, it was a quiet island resort. We rented a car and drove around the

island, marveling at the ever-present iguanas, who clung to everything, including the

bottoms of billboards. In the afternoons, we sat on the beach and drank margaritas. By

about the third day, we were drinking Pepto-Bismol. The mid-November weather had

turned, so we spent most of the rest of the time in bed--playing gin rummy. Thus did my

marriage begin, with a deck of cards, playing a game that led my father to keep a couple

of hundred dollars cash in his pocket in case he spotted one of his Midland friends ready

to deal him in for a hand.

We returned home to George's new, single-story town house on Golf Course

Road, a street named for Midland's first and now long-vanished golf course. George had

furnished the house by trading oil leases with Charlie Knorr of Knorr's furniture. One

lease had gotten him a brown leather couch. Otherwise, he hadn't done much; in his yard,

a small forest of weeds had grown up as tall as the roofline. Indeed, George had hardly

done his laundry at home. He used to go to Don and Susie Evans's home for dinner; Susie

was Susie Marinis, my kindergarten friend and George's second-grade friend. As he ate,

he would do his laundry in the big commercial machines on the first floor of their garden

apartment complex.

But we were not destined to hang around home. A few months before George and

I met, Representative Mahon had announced his retirement from Congress after fortyfour years in office. The seat was open, and George was trying to win it as a Republican.

Politics was in his blood. His grandfather had been a U.S. senator, and his father had lost

twice running statewide for the U.S. Senate in Texas. But from 1967 to 1971, George H.

W. Bush had served two terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. Almost from the

moment we arrived home, George and I hit the campaign trail, covering a big swath of

West Texas.

We drove up and down the back roads and asphalt highways of the Texas

panhandle, from Midland at the southern tip up to Plainview and Hereford in the north,

with the New Mexican border running alongside. We spent nearly a year on the road, and

in many ways the bonds of our marriage were cemented in the front seat of that

Oldsmobile Cutlass. When George and I met, it was as if two parallel lives suddenly

converged. Our childhood memories, the places we had known, even many of our friends

overlapped. We were like the last two pieces of a puzzle, our similarities and

contradictions sized to fit. George was boisterous and loved to talk, while I've always

been quieter. And George came from a big family. It was an unexpected answer to my

childish wishes on all those stars. On my side, George got to be the only son-in-law. But

these layers of connections and commonalities forged a deeper, richer bond. We never

worried that any long-buried fact about the other person would appear and surprise us.

From the start, our marriage was built on a powerful foundation of trust. We had been

cut, as it were, from the same solid Permian Basin stone. So we drove and we talked and

we laughed and we dreamed in the front seat of George's Oldsmobile.

Campaigning in West Texas is an exercise in retail politics, shaking every hand,

knocking on every door. Many mornings, we'd head off to small farm towns where a

friend would host a coffee to meet the candidate and invite all of his or her neighbors.

We'd arrive, the coffeepots would be set out, along with plates of one hundred homebaked chocolate chip cookies. The morning would pass, and just three or four people in

pickup trucks would drop by. George and I would smile and eat through the mounds of

cookies as fast as we could.

The Nineteenth Congressional District was a traditionally Democratic district,

even if its voters had chosen Republicans for president for the last twenty-five years.

Eisenhower and Nixon may have carried Midland, but Congressman Mahon was a

Democrat, our governors and our state representatives were Democrats. Across the

graphlike lines of its square-grid counties, the sheriffs, the county commissioners, the

mayors, every local officeholder was a Democrat. Most people, including my parents,

were registered Democrats, and the Democratic primary usually mattered more than the

general election. As George H. W. Bush used to joke when he started the Republican

Party in Midland in the 1950s, only three people voted in the Republican primary,

Barbara Bush, himself, and a drunk Democrat who had wandered into the wrong side of

the polling place.

George knew all of this. He has an amazing intuitive grasp of politics, not just the

people aspect of it but the numbers, the vote totals that a candidate needed in each part of

the district to win. He understood the science of politics in a way that was quite

sophisticated for a candidate in 1978. But he had been working in politics for years.

Beyond his dad's races, he'd handled Gerald Ford's presidential run in Midland County in

1976, and he had worked for candidates in Florida and Alabama. From the start, George

knew that the numbers were stacked against him, but he also knew that the Nineteenth

was a conservative district with an open seat. The election could be very close. It was a

"what the heck, why not" run for George. We both knew that we could just as easily live

in a Midland ranch house for the rest of our lives as we could move to a Georgetown

town house, the kind of place where I imagined that all bright young congressmen and

senators resided.

But first we had to make it through the primary.

Because the district was large and sparse, candidates went out to meet the people,

and all five of the candidates, the two Democrats, Kent Hance and Morris Sheets, and the

three Republicans--George, Jim Reece, and Joe Hickox--would cross paths almost every

week. Most of the time it was at local forums, held on the lawns of the county

courthouses, the same courthouses that teenage boys and girls would cruise past in

endless circles on a Saturday night.

It was in one of these towns, Levelland, Texas, where the land lay every bit as flat

as the name, that I gave my first speech, a few months after George's famous pledge to

me that I would never have to give a speech. Not ever. It was the only promise he made

to me that he ever broke.

George couldn't be at this particular candidate forum, so I went in his place and

sat in a folding chair with all the other candidates in front of the courthouse. A local

official introduced me, and I got up to give my speech. I planted myself behind the

podium, grateful for the heavy, thick wood because my legs were shaking. And then I

looked up. Everyone in the audience and even the other candidates were nodding their

heads, encouraging me the entire time. When I finished speaking, I wasn't particularly

eager to do it again, but it also wasn't nearly as bad as I had anticipated. In fact, it wasn't

much different from reading a story to my students. People have an image of a librarian

as someone who says, "Shh," but a children's librarian talks all the time and is constantly

trying to engage students by reading and telling stories. Suddenly, all my old story hours

had a very different use. Out on the campaign trail, I discovered that politics is really

about people, and even though I was more reserved than George, I liked meeting the

oilmen, the farmers, the moms, and the store owners. I wanted to be with them and listen

to their stories.

During the long months before the primary, we got to know Kent Hance, the

Democratic front-runner, who was funny and smart and understood in his bones that this

was a rural district. Then George won his primary, and Kent won his. And the real hardnosed politicking began. Kent launched an ad that said, "In 1961, when Kent Hance

graduated from Dimmitt High School in the Nineteenth Congressional District, his

opponent, George W. Bush, was attending Andover Academy in Massachusetts. In 1965,

when Kent Hance graduated from Texas Tech, his opponent was at Yale University. And

when Kent Hance graduated from the University of Texas Law School, his opponent--get

this, folks--was attending Harvard. We don't need someone from the Northeast telling us

what the problems are." Never mind that George had spent nearly half his life in Midland,

he couldn't combat the ad. It was devastatingly effective.

On election night, George won 77 percent of the vote in Midland County. He also

won Ector and Andrews, the two other oil-producing counties in the district, but he lost in

the cotton-farming sections. George knew he'd lost the race when the Lubbock vote came

in. He had not won enough votes in that county. Overall, he lost to Kent Hance by some

6,600 ballots, or about 6 percent of all the votes cast. We were sad but not particularly

disappointed. Whatever plans we'd made in our minds, we'd simply have to make new

ones. It's a bit, I suppose, like breaking up with a boyfriend. When you are together, you

map out your future with that person in your life. When you separate, every plan for that

future is changed. But George and I still had each other. We were living in a town where

nearly every voter had voted for George, where our friends were, and where my parents

lived.

George went back to being a landman in the oil business, going to an office every

day, and I began to set up our new home. It was 1979, my thirty-fourth year, and I had no

strollers or baby buggies to park in our garage. I was hoping now, with the campaign

behind us, all that would change.

Our lives in Midland moved along at much the same pace as our parents' had;

men worked, women largely stayed home, and there were dinners out on Friday nights

and dinner parties on Saturdays with our circle of friends, Susie and Don Evans, Jan and

Joey O'Neill, and Penny and L. E. Sawyer, who had gone to Andover with George and

had come to Midland to work in the oil industry. There were times, at first, when I missed

campaigning, the thrill of setting off, just the two of us. When George came home and

dropped his wet towels on the furniture, I had to remind myself of how terrific he'd been

when he gave speeches. I came to overlook the fact that he also wasn't a great handyman

around the house. With his usual single-minded focus, George set out to build his small

oil business. He had gone from trading land leases to starting an exploration company of

his own. But to drill wells, he needed capital, so as much as we were at home in Midland,

we were also traveling to other parts of Texas, to New York, even to Scotland, so George

could line up investors. And in just a few months, we were back to politics. George

Herbert Walker Bush was running for president.

This time, though, I was on the periphery. George left to do some surrogate

speaking, but once Ronald Reagan wrapped up the nomination, we returned to our lives

in Midland. We didn't even bother to go to Detroit for the Republican convention.

Instead, we were in New York. It was a weeknight, and George and I were having dinner

with some investors at the "21" Club, waiting like everyone else for the official

announcement that Ronald Reagan had selected former president Gerald Ford to be his

vice president. Suddenly a couple of white-jacketed waiters muscled a television over to

the corner where our group was sitting. The dial was turned to CBS. Correspondent

Leslie Stahl reported that George H. W. Bush was Reagan's vice presidential pick.

George leapt up from the table to call his dad, and then we raced back to the hotel and left

at the crack of dawn the next morning to fly to Detroit. There wasn't a hotel room to be

found; we slept on a rollaway in one of George's brothers' rooms. And suddenly, we were

back on the campaign trail, this time stumping for Reagan and Bush.

Election night was November 4, my birthday, and we gathered in Houston. I went

out to lunch with friends and then went to the Bushes' house on Indian Trail before the

family drove to a big hotel ballroom for the results. Reagan-Bush won in a landslide.

Days before, many commentators had predicted a second term for Jimmy Carter.

George and I and Regan and Billy and Donnie and Susie flew up to Washington

for the inauguration. We sat on the inaugural platform at the back of the Capitol, gazing

out at the Washington Monument in the distance as the oaths of office were recited.

When the ceremony ended, we were ushered inside to a lunch amid the gleaming marble

columns of Statuary Hall. Suddenly, I heard the U.S. Army Strings begin to play, their

haunting violins unexpectedly surrounding us, and I gasped. Years later, at my own

White House dinners, I would glance around to watch the enthralled expressions of our

guests as a procession of strings magically appeared in the State Dining Room.

George and I now existed in that particularly strange netherworld of celebrity by

association. In Midland, cars drove slowly past our house as locals pointed out "this is

where Vice President Bush's son lives" to their out-of-town guests. We were vaguely

"someone," the children of the famous, while I had the quiet ache of having no children

of my own.

For some years now, the wedding invitations that had once crowded the mailbox

had been replaced by shower invites and pink-or blue-beribboned baby announcements. I

bought onesies and rattles, wrapped them in yellow paper, and delivered them to friends.

I had done it with a happy wistfulness, believing that someday my time, my baby, would

come. George and I had hoped that I would be pregnant by the end of his congressional

run. Then we hoped it would be by the time his own father announced his presidential

run, then by the presidential primaries, the convention, the general election. But each

milestone came and went. The calendar advanced, and there was no baby.

The English language lacks the words to mourn an absence. For the loss of a

parent, grandparent, spouse, child, or friend, we have all manner of words and phrases,

some helpful, some not. Still, we are conditioned to say something, even if it is only "I

am sorry for your loss." But for an absence, for someone who was never there at all, we

are wordless to capture that particular emptiness. For those who deeply want children and

are denied them, those missing babies hover like silent, ephemeral shadows over their

lives. Who can describe the feel of a tiny hand that is never held?

In the fall of 1980, as the white-hot presidential race was drawing to a close,

George and I decided to apply to the Gladney Home in Fort Worth to adopt a baby. We

had friends from Midland who had been Gladney babies and other friends who had

already adopted their own children from there. Janet and Fred Heyne's daughter and son

were Gladney babies. In later years, Susie and Donnie Evans, Jan and Joey O'Neill, and

then George's brother Marvin and his wife, Margaret, would all adopt one or more of

their children from Gladney.

What became the Gladney Home began in 1887, when a trainload of abandoned

children from the northeastern United States arrived in Fort Worth on what was called the

"orphan train." Over 150,000 children rode those trains from the East Coast to the

Southwest until 1929. Now we were hoping that someone else's child might find a place

to be loved in our home. We filled out the paperwork. Mother snapped a photo of us

along the fence line of our backyard, George in a brown corduroy jacket, me in a red

sweater and pleated pants, our smiles strained but hopeful. Every time I come across that

photo, it seems to say, "Please give this couple a baby."

At the same time as we were driving to Fort Worth for our Gladney interview and

tour, I started to see Dr. Robert Franklin in Houston, Texas, for hormone treatments. In

April of 1981, just as we were waiting for our home visit from Gladney, I discovered that

I was pregnant.

I was anxious the entire time that I was pregnant. The memories of Mother's late

miscarriages hung over me. And I was thirty-four years old, which in 1981 was

considered old for a first-time mother. We had so longed for children and I was so

superstitious about this pregnancy that I even avoided the baby aisle of the grocery store.

The days and then the weeks passed, but I remained afraid to hope.

Dr. Franklin was also worried that I might miscarry, just as Mother had. The

recommended treatment was cervical sutures. George and I headed to Houston for the

procedure, our fingers interlaced, our hands clasped together, communicating in that one

gesture every hope that we held for all the months to come. While we were in Houston,

Dr. Franklin scheduled us for a sonogram, which was a relatively new technology and not

at all routine. Our radiologist was a doctor named Srini Malini, and we watched her as

she studied the incomprehensible flecks of white scoring the dark gray screen. At last she

turned to look at us and said, "There are two babies." George's eyes and mine overflowed.

But Dr. Malini kept staring at the screen.

Her next words were "They are not cojoined." Both of us gasped; we had never

envisioned such a thing. My mind began to race with questions, and I asked her to look to

see if there were any heart defects, anything associated with Down syndrome. I had

already decided against amniocentesis, because we didn't want to tempt the risk of

miscarriage. And these were my babies. I would love them however they came. Dr.

Malini looked very closely, and then she said, "They're beautiful babies," the words I had

longed to hear.

We asked if she could tell whether they were boys or girls. She turned back to the

machine and said, "I can tell that the top one is a girl, but I can't see the one underneath as

well. I'm pretty sure she's a girl, but I'm not positive."

The next day I had the sutures, and I sat in my hospital bed that night watching

the highlights of Prince Charles and Lady Diana's storybook wedding, dreaming of a

happy ending of my own. George had a dozen roses delivered to my room and signed the

card, "With love, from the father of twins."

When I first learned that I was pregnant, I had pictured two babies in my mind.

My next thought was that it's greedy to want two babies, and I berated myself for even

thinking such a thing. Now there were going to be two babies, if all went well. One of my

friends in Midland was a midwife, and she told me that anyone pregnant with twins

should lie down in the morning and again in the afternoon, and I did that. I took Lamaze

lessons from my close friend Penny Slade-Sawyer, who was the mother of three boys. I

went to the neighboring city of Odessa to see my obstetrician, Dr. Charles Stephens,

every three weeks, and my father insisted upon driving me there each time. Then in early

November, when I was barely seven months along, Dr. Stephens found the early signs of

preeclampsia. My blood pressure was dangerously high. He looked at me with a worried

face and said, "I'll never forgive myself if you don't get at least one baby." He wanted me

to go to Houston or Dallas, where there were neonatal intensive care units, because he

was sure the babies would be born prematurely and might need special care. I chose

Baylor Hospital in Dallas because my uncle Mark was a doctor there and the

neonatologist, Dr. Delores Carruth, was the mother of twins. George and I booked our

flight.

In Dallas, I was admitted to the hospital and put on bed rest. I was determined to

give the babies every possible day to develop and grow; I wanted them to have whatever

chance I could give them. George was traveling between Dallas and Midland, tending to

me, tending to his business, finishing his job as chairman of Midland's United Way

charity campaign. But I was not lonely in my hospital room. Barbara Bush scheduled an

event in Texas and came to see me, and so did my Dallas friends Pam Nelson and her

husband, Bill, and Anne Johnson, the wife of Clay Johnson, one of George's longtime

friends from Andover and Yale. Clay and Anne had seven-year-old twin boys of their

own. Weldon and Robert visited me one day in my hospital room and soberly counseled,

"We were premature and it wasn't that bad."

On November 24, George was back in Midland hosting the final United Way

luncheon when my Baylor doctor, James Boyd, called him and said, "You are going to

have your babies tomorrow." George asked him, "Are you sure?" And Dr. Boyd said,

"Yes, unless you want your wife's kidneys to fail." My blood pressure was too high, and

it was dangerous to continue the pregnancy. George rushed back to Dallas, and at dawn

the next morning, I was wheeled into the operating theater for a cesarean section. George

was standing next to me as they delivered the babies. Barbara came first at five pounds,

four ounces, and Jenna second at four pounds, twelve ounces. They were five weeks

early.

We had chosen to name the girls after our mothers, and we did it alphabetically

and democratically. The baby who arrived first would be Barbara, the second would be

Jenna.

Word was out that the vice president's daughter-in-law would be giving birth at

Baylor, and all the television stations from Dallas were waiting at the hospital. One

cameraman brazenly walked up to the maternity ward. As I was being wheeled from the

operating room, he stepped from behind a wall with his camera. I was swollen with

edema from the toxemia and my failing kidneys, and now my postcesarean face was

flashed on the local news. It was humiliating. And what was even worse was that I

smiled, trying to be accommodating, rather than simply telling him to go away and leave

me alone. News photographers snapped pictures of George and the babies so that papers

across the country could run the photo with the caption "The vice president's latest

grandchildren."

Our girls were here and healthy, and we were thrilled. The country music group

the Oak Ridge Boys sent tiny pink sequined jackets. And the jazz great Lionel Hampton

sent three vases of red roses to my room, one for me, one for Barbara, and one for Jenna,

with a note saying, "Welcome to the world. Lionel Hampton."

And we welcomed them. They were, quite simply, the answer to all our prayers.

I never saw Dr. Malini after that one visit in Houston, when she showed us the

first images of our girls. Then on July 18, 2005, George and I hosted an official dinner at

the White House for the Indian prime minister, Mahmohan Singh, and his wife,

Gursharan Kaur. The State Dining Room was transformed into an Indian garden, with

overflowing vases of orange and red flowers, saffron-hued silk tablecloths, and miniature

trumpeting elephants fashioned from hot pink and green mums and roses. For that dinner,

one invitation was particularly precious to me. I invited Dr. Malini. When she came

through the long receiving line wearing a stunning orange sari, George announced to the

prime minister of India that she was the doctor who'd told us we were having twins, that

she was the first doctor to see our babies. Dr. Malini laughed and said, "Yes, and I've

honored patient confidentiality for all these years. I've never told anyone that I was the

one who saw for the first time that you were going to have twins." I sat her at my table,

and nothing made me happier than to see her beautiful smile all through dinner. It was

such a small thing to give back to someone who had given us so much on that hot and

anxious July afternoon.

A few days after the girls were born, Mother and Daddy flew into Dallas to see

the babies. Uncle Mark stopped by, and Daddy told him that he was having shoulder

pain. Mark immediately went on alert. "I just had a patient who died of lung cancer," he

told him, "and his first symptom was shoulder pain. When was your last X-ray?" Daddy

hadn't had a chest X-ray in a while. Uncle Mark hustled him off to Radiology. When the

films came back, the radiologist didn't see anything, but Uncle Mark did. It was a tiny

spot, the kind of shadow that perhaps only a brother would have seen. He pointed to it

and asked the radiologist, "What about this?" I had just given birth to twins, and my

father was being diagnosed with lung cancer. He and Mother headed back to Midland to

pack for a long hospital stay. Daddy's only hope of beating the disease was if surgeons

removed part of his lung.

Joey O'Neill's dad offered to send his private plane to pick George and me and the

girls up when we were finally released from the hospital, in mid-December. It saved us a

six-hour drive or a commercial flight with two premature babies. When the plane left

Midland for Dallas, my mother and daddy were onboard. Daddy was coming to Baylor

for his surgery; I was leaving to return home to Midland. I don't remember what we said

to each other; I was too overwhelmed. Life and death were balanced on the span of those

two aluminum wings.

George and I arrived home, and we were on our own. While I had been at Baylor,

my friends had hosted a baby shower for me and had set up the nursery. I hadn't even

decorated a room or shopped for baby clothes because I was afraid to prepare for a future

that might not come to pass. Now I had armfuls of diapers and tiny clothes and bottles,

and I was completely overwhelmed. George and I had no experience with babies, and

suddenly we had two, who seemed to cry all the time. I longed for my own mother, but

she was with Daddy, first in the hospital and then for his long convalescence at home.

Friends came over to help set up our Christmas tree.

For months, I had secretly daydreamed of sitting under the Christmas tree with

George and our two wonderful babies, like some storybook tableau. Instead, we were

bleary-eyed and nervous, trying to soothe howling twins. Some nights, we put them in

their cribs and literally ran to the other side of the house, hoping for an hour of quiet.

Eventually, driven by exhaustion and inexperience, we hired a baby nurse to help us get

up with the girls in the middle of the night and to give us a chance to ever so briefly leave

the house. After the girls were in their cribs, we would take long walks around Midland

in the chilly wintry darkness, arm in arm.

Christmas came and went, and we adjusted. We got the girls on a strict routine.

We fed them both at the same time, even in the middle of the night. We put them down

early, and they woke up early, and I had them nap in the mornings and afternoons. I

believe very strongly in the importance of sleep for all children, but especially for

premature babies, whose brains are still growing and developing. After the initial crying

and the trauma of us trying to adjust to them and them simply trying to adjust to the

world, both girls became happy babies. And George and I discovered a wonderful

symmetry in having twins; there was always a baby for one of us to hold. Every morning

before dawn, George would get up to make the coffee, as he had done from the start of

our marriage; then he would go get the girls and carry them into our bed. We'd each hold

a baby and drink our coffee while they drank their bottles, with the morning news

droning quietly in the background. The start of the day was reserved for just the four of

us. Those early mornings were some of the sweetest times of our lives.

In the afternoons, even in the frigid winters or broiling summers, I would push the

girls in their stroller around the sidewalks of Midland. I adored those walks through the

daytime quiet in the same neighborhood where my family's "Big House" had been, where

each yard or square of sidewalk held a childhood memory of my own. At the end of our

walks, we passed a large, frosted globe light planted atop a post on a neighbor's front

lawn. One afternoon Barbara lifted up her little hand, pointed, and said, "Moon." We had

been reading *Goodnight Moon* at bedtime, and she thought this white orb was the moon

rising on her street.

I still worried, though. The doctors had told me that many premature babies have

eye problems, so when they were around six months old, I took both girls to an eye

specialist, who waved a penlight around the room and had them follow it with their eyes.

He told me they were very alert girls, and I breathed a relieved sigh. They crawled early

and walked by age one. But I still remember the couple of days when Barbara acted

listless. I bundled her off to Dr. Dorothy Wyvell, who had been my pediatrician and who

had treated the Bush children. Every child in Midland seemed to have been poked,

prodded, and tongue-depressed by Dr. Wyvell. She had gray hair now, and she remained

strikingly blunt. She did an exam, ordered some tests, and looked at me. "I know why

you're worried," she said. "It's to be expected." With that, she pronounced Barbara fine.

Dr. Wyvell was the one who had diagnosed George's little sister Robin's leukemia when

she was three and had told Barbara and George Bush that there was nothing they could do

but make her comfortable. Leukemia was fatal, Dr. Wyvell explained, and she would slip

away in a matter of weeks. Robin spent most of the next six months in Sloan-Kettering in

New York, pumped full of transfusions on the slim hope of a cure before she died.

At home, I bought a baby food grinder and made all the girls' meals from scratch.

Later, when we went out to eat Mexican food on Friday nights, we would bring the girls,

and they would sit in their high chairs eating beans and rice. After those years of living

just the two of us, I was happy to have a home with baby toys strewn across the floor and

crawling and toddling twins, exploring every nook and cranny of their world.

Daddy recovered from his surgery, and he and Mother began to drop by all the

time to see the babies. Daddy's favorite time to arrive was right after lunch, just when I'd

put the girls down for a nap. He would knock on the door, open it wide, and loudly call,

"Laura, are the babies awake?" They invariably heard him, and once they could pull

themselves up, they would be standing in their cribs beaming when their grandfather

opened the door. He loved to hold them on his lap, their two little bald heads and his big

one bent over together. We spent our Christmases with Mother and Daddy, and the girls

clamored to go to Mother and Daddy's house on Halloween, to trick-or-treat there first.

Mother brought pink-frosted cupcakes on Valentine's Day, and we set up Easter egg

hunts. Barbara scoured the grass and bushes and found the most eggs. She was a young

collector, with mounds of colored eggs clutched in her hands and pressed tightly against

her chest. Jenna was our homebody. When we were selling the town house on Golf

Course to move to a larger ranch-style house on Harvard Avenue, she got on her tricycle

and pinned one prospective buyer inside our little concrete backyard. As fast as her feet

could push, Jenna rode in tight circles around the woman's legs until she could hardly

take a step. Jenna was determined to defend her home against intruders at all costs.

Both girls were early talkers. I would repeat to them, "Say 'Daddy,'" and "Daddy"

was their first word, which thrilled George. I've long thought that it's a smart thing for

mothers to do, to teach their children the word "Daddy" first.

George loved being a dad. He changed diapers when the girls were small. He got

up at night to help feed them their bottles. He would come home and think of adventures.

One night, when a rare Midland snow had started to fall and the girls had just turned

three, he announced after dinner that we were going for a snow walk. We bundled the

girls in their jackets and trooped off in the darkness, and as the snow shimmered under

the glinting streetlights, we held up our faces to feel the flakes land one by one. And he

loved to play with his daughters. Some weekends, we would head to Donnie and Susie

Evans's house on Lake Travis outside of Austin, and the dads would play El Tigre with

the kids at night, under the stars and the moon. The kids would run around the cedar

brush and the dads--George, Donnie, and Charlie Younger, another good friend from

Midland--would chase them and growl or roar. Somehow, the kids always managed to

hide from or outwit El Tigre. Once, George, Donnie, and Charlie were creeping

underneath the branches of live oaks when they spooked an owl that took off screeching

into the air. That bird gave the three Tigres more of a scare than they ever gave the kids.

Another of our good friends, Mike Weiss, later told me that George had taught

him how to play with his own kids. "My dad never played with me," he told me once.

"George taught me how to be funny, how to have fun with them and have a good time."

Our lives in those years in Midland were centered on our family and our friends.

Often, Mother and Daddy would come for dinner. I would call Mother late in the

afternoon to see what she was cooking, and we would put our meals together around our

little table. I remember one summer evening, working in the flower beds in our yard after

the girls had gone to sleep, while the sun still hung low in the sky. George was sitting on

the steps with the newspaper, and I thought to myself, This is the life. And it was.

For the first four years that George's dad was vice president, we rarely went to

Washington. In the late spring of 1984, the Bushes came to Midland for a reelection rally

for Reagan-Bush. We met their motorcade at the airport and rode in with the girls in the

fleet of sleek black limousines. As we wound our way along the loop road, past the new

acres of warehouses and strip mall buildings toward downtown Midland, cars slowed

down and pulled over. Dozens of Midland drivers thought we were a funeral procession

heading to the cemetery.

But that physical distance also meant that we were the outliers on the Bush family

curve. We were not with them for Christmas, only for summer visits in Maine, with all

the other cousins and meals for a small army of Bushes and wet beach towels strewn

about the Kennebunkport house. George's parents had no time for drop-by visits to our

home. Once, when the girls were two and a half, Bar Bush made a rare stop in Midland.

Jenna and Barbara ran out of the house with their arms held out to greet her, calling

"Ganny," the name all Bushes give their grandmothers, and she looked up at me and said

with gratitude, "Thank you for teaching your girls to know me."

I always hoped I would have more babies. But I was thirty-five when the girls

were born. The years unwound and it didn't happen. George never once said that he

wanted more children. He never once said that he would have liked a son. He has always

been thrilled with the two girls we got. We both are. But my heart was deep enough for

more. There remained that twinge of what might have been.

Some 300 million years ago, the oceans overran much of the earth's land. The

place I know as West Texas was nothing more than a vast floor at the bottom of the tepid

Permian Sea. Slowly, over the millennia, the waters began to recede. Reefs and shell

banks collapsed into dry ground. Twelve thousand feet of sand, limestone, and silica were

left behind by the sea's ebb, collecting in what is known as the Permian Basin. Then the

water swept in one last time. Clay and limestone, prehistoric boulders and debris were

strewn across the valley, producing a long, continuous plain, with the remnants of this

ancient sea floor buried underneath. And among the fossilized fish and shells and curious

spiny creatures that once plumbed its depths, pools of oil and pockets of natural gas

formed. The roughly 100,000 square miles of Permian Basin land in West Texas and

New Mexico are thought to hold significant portions of the United States' oil and natural

gas reserves. Midland, Texas, sits in the basin's geographic center. When oil was found,

Midland was where the oilmen came.

The inhabitants of the Texas plains had long known about petroleum. They were

not as resourceful as the ancient Egyptians, who covered their mummified bodies in

pitch, or the Babylonians (who built their kingdom in what is now Iraq), who employed it

to pave their streets. But occasionally native Indian tribes wandered past oil springs and

tar pits; their healers and medicine men sometimes spread the black oozings over achy

joints and sores on the skin in hope of a cure. The Indians taught the early settlers to do

the same, and on the range, ground oil was used for lubricating wagon wheels.

Although the first Texas oil well was dug in 1866, only in 1901 did men succeed

in finding an oil gusher. Midland's first oil boom occurred during the 1920s. It sputtered

back to life partway through the Great Depression. The 1950s were its golden age, the

1960s its crash. But by the mid-1970s, Midland had begun to rebound. The Arab oil

embargo and long gas lines sent oil companies flocking back to Midland. Cranes dotted

the skyline, sleek glass buildings rose along the downtown streets, and by 1983 only three

other cities in the entire state of Texas had built more office space than Midland. Money

followed. From 1974 to 1981, Midland's bank deposits rose from $385 million to nearly

$2 billion. The most successful oilmen bought private planes and Mercedeses or outsize

Cadillacs. They teed off at the country club in the middle of a weekday afternoon and

gambled outrageous sums on every hole. Their wives glittered with diamonds. There

were ranches bought in other states, second homes, and jet rides for an afternoon of

shopping in Dallas at Neiman Marcus. People planned spectacular parties and flew in the

bands and the caterers. Rolls-Royce opened a Midland showroom. So many newcomers

flocked to the city to get into the oil business that Midland literally ran out of room; it

was impossible to find a vacant house.

George and I lived a life far removed from this extravagant wealth. Our biggest

indulgence was a membership in the Midland Country Club, although George did earn

enough that I had the luxury of being able to stay home with the girls.

Still, living in Midland in 1982 was like having drawn up a chair to a card game

where the bettors at the table held a flush in every hand.

George started in the oil business as a landman. He had moved to Midland in

1975 after he graduated from Harvard Business School. He spent hours combing

courthouse records to determine who owned the mineral rights on a particular tract of

land, which could be leased for oil well drilling. After he lost his 1978 congressional

race, he started a small, independent oil exploration business, Arbusto Energy (*arbusto* is

"bush" in Spanish). Independent oilmen find and drill new wells. When prices are high,

the risks are good ones. In the early 1970s, a West Texas oil driller had a one in fifty shot

of hitting a small oil field, a one in one thousand chance of striking a big one. But at the

start of 1983, oil prices in Texas plunged.

A barrel of West Texas crude lost five dollars in a single week in January. As

opposed to twenty-six or twenty-eight dollars a barrel, it was now just over nineteen. The

Midland banks were the first to fail. George walked into First National Bank on the

morning of its demise. Mr. Cowden, the descendent of one of Midland's first ranching

families, was standing in the gray marble lobby pleading with his depositors not to

withdraw their funds. His weathered face taut with emotion, he promised them, "Your

money is safe here. Please don't take your money. Your money is safe." But the line of

customers stretched across the lobby and down the block as people waited to cash out

their holdings. By the time the final slip had been passed to a teller, the bank's last cent

was all but gone. In a concluding touch of irony, First National, the largest independent

bank in the state, had been chartered back in 1890, during the cattle days, after the

devastating drought of 1886 and 1887. Cowboys who rode the range to round up what

animals remained called it the "Great Die-off." Ranches were abandoned from the Rio

Grande to the farthest reaches of the Great Plains. After that disaster, three Midlanders,

including John Scharbauer, whose family later built the fancy downtown hotel, chartered

a bank designed to see cattlemen through the "bad times." Slightly less than a hundred

years later, Midland's First National would not survive this one.

George was anxious about the future of his own small company and his seven

employees. He merged with another, larger company, Spectrum 7, in 1984. Oil prices

briefly stabilized, then dropped again. We watched as drilling rigs went idle one by one.

The top owners lost their vacation homes, their jets, even the desks and the few spankingnew computers that had been in their now-empty buildings. Moving trucks pulled up to

downtown towers, and the contents of entire offices were carted out by burly men. The

remnants of prosperity were bundled off to warehouses and sold for cents on the dollar at

periodic public auctions. But it wasn't just the wealthy oilmen. Oil drilling is built on a

scaffold of engineers, geologists, scientists, pipeline men, and roughnecks, pumpers, and

roustabouts out in the field. They were among the first to be let go. Families picked up

and fled, houses sat for months, even years, unsold. I'd see the signs planted on lawns, or

swinging forlornly from posts as I drove around. Friends, acquaintances, and stalwarts

around Midland edged toward ruin. The "big oil" I knew were the people who worked at

decent jobs, who bought homes, sent their children to school, prayed in church, and

pushed their shopping carts down the supermarket aisle next to mine.

With that peculiar West Texas pluck, car bumpers sported stickers that read:

"Please, Lord, let there be another boom. I promise I won't piss it away next time."

George took a 25 percent pay cut, shaved whatever costs he could, and tried to hang on.

We had already been going to church since before the girls were born; it was

where I felt, at last, the gentle embrace of faith again. Now some of our friends, like Don

Evans and Don Jones, started a Wednesday-night Bible study for men. George was one of

the first to begin attending.

One summer during college, I had a date with a boy in Midland. We'd gone

downtown to see the Summer Mummers, the local theater group, perform, and he was

driving me home. During the show, he had constantly refilled his frosted glass from a

pitcher of beer. I had paid no attention until we were in the car. His face was flushed, and

his eyes shone like glass. He drove me back home without stopping at a single red light

or slowing for a stop sign. We screeched through the streets of Midland, and I gripped my

seat until my knuckles were white, and I could feel rivulets of sweat sliding down my

skin. Whenever the engine slackened, I wondered if I could simply open the door and

jump out, leaving him and the car to sail on alone. We made it to my front door, but I was

shaking. Yet after I was back at SMU, I still got in cars with people who had been

drinking, because that was just what everyone did.

Midland was a drinking town. After Prohibition was repealed, Midland County

remained largely dry; residents repeatedly voted against allowing alcohol sales. But that

only changed how people drank. Range-weary cowboys drank; cattlemen, railroad men,

oilmen coming in from the fields, all of them drank. But so did the operators, the

engineers and scientists and geologists who came after that. For years, liquor and mixed

drinks couldn't be served in restaurants, but private clubs could pour a drink straight from

the bottle, so people joined clubs, especially country clubs, where their individual

"bottles" could be kept in their lockers. Vodka, bourbon, scotch, gin, anything with a

kick, came out, glass after glass. Those who didn't join clubs, like my father, simply

drove to package stores at the county line and carried out their bottles in brown paper

bags. At Johnny's Bar-B-Q, Daddy could pour his own drinks from Johnny's private stash

in the kitchen.

All through my growing up, adults hosted dinner parties laced with cocktails and

finished with nightcaps. More than once, men and women would weave their way from

the hostess's front steps to their cars and drive home. My mother rarely drank, and

certainly not to excess. She might nurse a Tom Collins through an evening. But my father

drank every night. On the weekends, he and his buddies would watch football, betting on

the games and mixing martinis or pouring generous fingers of bourbon. During the week,

the downtown men usually ordered cocktails with their lunches behind the thick walls of

the Petroleum Club.

Women drank too. I remember one girl I knew in high school who we all thought

was wild and who had a bad reputation. Twenty years later, back in Midland, I was

working on the high school reunion committee. She came and told us that throughout

high school, her mother had been falling-down drunk in her house. But in Midland, no

one talked about those things. Any escape had to be her own.

Two decades out, almost nothing had changed. We were wealthier than our

parents, we were less frugal because none of us had been scarred by a depression, but we

were living much the same lives--dinners out on Friday, dinner parties in on Saturday-and alcohol was part of each one.

On Fridays, we usually ate Mexican food, and the women drank margaritas and

the men drank beer. On Saturdays, it was dinner at someone's home, usually a barbecue

where everyone would bring something--appetizers, salads, desserts. And alcohol. There

was wine, there was vodka, and there were mixed drinks, and we drank them. My father,

who was retired, now liked to have a martini with lunch and a bourbon or two with

dinner. George drank the three Bs, a bourbon before dinner, a beer with dinner, and then

B & B, a sweet after-dinner drink. It was lethal, and it was completely accepted because

that, or some version of it, was the drinking life of most men. At parties as the night

deepened, the men grew louder, the cut of their jokes sharpened, and they laughed at

everything. In many homes, the morning began with coffee and aspirin. George would go

for a run. He is an incredibly disciplined athlete, and he ran every day, even at lunchtime

in the summer, when the sun seemed to stand still atop Midland. He ran and he sweated

out the dregs of the alcohol. But come nightfall, he'd pour another drink.

He didn't have three drinks every night; many times all he had was a beer. But

when he'd poured enough, he could be a bore. Maybe it's funny when other people's

husbands have had too much to drink at a party, but I didn't think it was funny when mine

did. And I told him so. But I never said the line "It's either Jim Beam or me." That joke

came much later. I was not going to leave George, and I wasn't going to let him leave me

with twins. Our marriage was enduring, we loved each other, and we were two people

who did not have divorce in our DNA. But I was disappointed. And I let him know that I

thought he could be a better man.

In 1986, we planned a July trip to the Broadmoor in Colorado Springs to celebrate

our fortieth birthdays, George's, mine, and Don and Susie Evans's. Jan and Joey O'Neill

came, and so did our good friend Penny Slade-Sawyer. Neil Bush, George's younger

brother who lived in Colorado, came too. The men played golf, and the women sunned by

the pool. And on the last night, everyone, especially the men, ordered too much to drink

at the bar. I heard the same toast repeated twenty times. I've joked that George quit the

next day because he got the bar bill, but it was a combination of things. It was the fact of

turning forty; it was the fact of his father being the vice president and the expectation that

Mr. Bush would run for president. None of the Bush children ever wanted to do anything

to embarrass their dad. But it was also having talked with Billy Graham the summer he

turned thirty-nine, when we were visiting his parents in Maine, and it was joining that

Wednesday-night Bible study in Midland, which fixed George's mind on a higher

purpose. It was living through an oil bust when people we knew had lost everything and

recognizing that failures are best met head-on, clear-eyed. And some of it was growing

into being a father and a husband. There had been many drunken and half-drunken

weekends, there was nothing particularly out of the ordinary about this one, except that it

was one weekend too many. It was to be the last one.

When George decided that he was done with alcohol, he never complained, he

just stopped drinking. And he was surprised by how quickly he felt better, by how great it

is to wake up in the morning when you haven't had a drink the night before. He ran

better, he read better. We had always taken books to bed and read at night, but George

never read for very long. Now reading became a pleasure for him again.

We kept going to the same parties, but George would have a nonalcoholic beer.

And gradually, many of our friends stopped or slowed their drinking, one after being

stopped for drunken driving, another after a stay at the Betty Ford clinic. Others just put

away their bottles and six-packs and moved on. One friend told me, after she had joined

AA and progressed through the twelve steps to the one for making amends, that she had

driven Barbara and Jenna to their art lessons after she had been drinking. I had seen her,

waved to them as she got behind the wheel, and had never known. A few of the heaviest

drinkers who didn't quit, women and men, are in their sixties now, and my heart breaks at

how much they are struggling.

Years after George quit, as Mother and I sat talking one quiet afternoon, she

turned and said that, unlike me, she had never thought to ask Daddy to stop drinking.

Although George H. W. Bush was in his second term as vice president, George

and I had not been invited to a single state dinner. We read newspaper accounts of the

Reagans' black-tie evenings, where the women wore long, shimmering gowns and

strappy high heels and everyone toasted equally elegant foreign guests. Once, George's

dad did ask, "Have y'all been invited to a state dinner?" And George and I both said no.

He immediately promised that we would receive an invitation. Months passed. George

finally said, "Dad, I thought we were going to be invited to a state dinner." He replied,

"Oh no, I said a *steak* dinner." We all laughed and assumed that our invitation would

never come as the Reagan administration ticked toward a close. Then, a lovely embossed

envelope with the perfect pen-and-ink calligraphy arrived, inviting us to a state dinner at

the White House. It was one of the last dinners that the Reagans held. And it was on the

same day the movers were coming to our house to load our boxes and start on the journey

up to Washington, D.C. George H. W. Bush, the man our children called Gampy, was

going to run for president, and his campaign manager, Lee Atwater, had asked George to

move to Washington to work on his father's race. We were leaving Midland.

I had been working with the movers for over a month to arrange everything.

Traveling to Washington for the dinner would require two plane flights and considerable

expense. It seemed impossible to change our dates and rearrange everything. I called the

White House's social secretary to decline, and she made a surprised sound into the other

end of the phone.

Indeed, during the first Reagan-Bush term, when George and I were invited to a

Sunday-afternoon concert performed by Itzhak Perlman, we had decided to make a

special trip to Washington. George packed his nicest suit; I had a fancy dress. We were

both nervous about going to the White House. Inside, women gingerly picked their way

along the slick marble stairs and halls. My eyes wandered, taking in the velvet and

brocade and the heavy wooden tables and carved chairs, the high ceilings and glittering

chandeliers, and the crush of far more elegantly dressed people in each room. We sat on

gold banquet chairs that had been precisely arranged in rows across the East Room, with

a special roped-off section for the most important dignitaries, and waited patiently in the

receiving line to shake President and Mrs. Reagan's hands. When the military aides

announced us, both George and I were speechless. We smiled and stayed mute, having no

idea what to say. Now, after years of receiving lines, I'm grateful for the people who don't

say anything except "I'm so happy to be here," and just keep moving. It can take hours for

the president and the first lady to shake all those hands.

Before the movers came, we had a big yard sale. I sold off furniture, books, baby

clothes and toys, almost anything that wasn't nailed down. Susie and Donnie Evans

helped us tag everything, including the baby beds and baby things that we had kept in

storage for so long, and set it out on our front lawn. We were shedding our life of almost

ten years. Some things we got rid of I wish I'd kept, like an old Ronald Reagan movie

poster that we had framed. I don't know what possessed me to sell it, just the frenzy of

divesting ourselves.

I've always traveled light; I look back on over thirty years of marriage, and aside

from shelves of scrapbooks and books, we've accumulated startlingly few things. As

we've moved, we've donated or given away many of our furniture pieces and rugs, even

posters and paintings. I prefer to keep memories rather than things. Some of it is my

dislike of clutter and its complications. Some of it comes from being a librarian, when I

had to manage a collection. I had to catalog each piece, check bindings and repair tears; I

culled the volumes, removing copies that had grown too tattered or worn. Every object

had to pass through my fingertips. It has made me wary of the responsibility of too many

things.

We set off for Washington with a small moving van and our Pontiac sedan and

Chevy station wagon, leaving behind our friends and our home. I had never lived outside

of Texas for more than a few weeks. I was forty-one years old. For more than twenty-five

of those years, Midland had been my home; for more than twenty years, it had been

George's. It was not just the pan-flat arid land that we were leaving behind with each mile

of road but a way of being and of speaking. People in West Texas believe that they think

differently, and to a large degree they do. There is a plainness to the way West Texas

looks that translates into how people act and what they value. Those who live there are

direct and blunt to the point of hurt sometimes. There is no time for artifice; it looks and

sounds ridiculous amid the barren landscape. From the era of the first settlers, people or

animals could freeze or starve or roast if debates went on too long or too many niceties

were observed.

The West Texas plains were seared on each of us like an invisible brand. I am

struck sometimes by the words spoken by Ten Bears, the Great Comanche war chief, as

he pleaded with Abraham Lincoln's men not to force his people onto a reservation: "I was

born upon the prairie, where the wind blew free, and there was nothing to break the light

of the sun. I was born where there were no enclosures, and where everything drew a free

breath." And how similar his words sound to the rougher-edged lament of the cattlemen-the same men who had driven the Comanches from their land. As he grew old, the

Midland rancher W. C. Cochran wrote, "For anyone who loved God's own creation, it

was a paradise on earth. . . . The hills and valleys abounded with deer, turkey, bear, and

antelope. Bee trees were numerous and buffalo common. . . . Every old-timer cowman

remembers these times. The wire fences took all the joy and thrill out of the cow business

for the old boys, who remembered when they used to sit around camp and talk about who

had the best horses and play a little ten cent ante when it was not their night to ride fifteen

or twenty miles. Those good old days passed away with the coming of the wire fence."

Out on that range, people adapted to the land; the land contoured them, not the

other way around.

We left Midland, but never truly left it behind. And it invariably found us. After

George was elected governor, he chose as his official desk an old oak piece that had

belonged to his father. He was sure it had been his dad's congressional desk, and George

had a brass plaque made identifying it as the desk of Rep. George H. W. Bush. The desk

was installed at the Texas Capitol, and when his father first saw it, he laughed. That desk

had never been to Congress. A young oilman named George H. W. Bush had bought it

for a hundred dollars, secondhand, on a sidewalk in downtown Midland.

I arrived in Washington a day early and headed for the vice president's residence,

to spend one night before I was to move us into a town house that George and I had

bought near American University. My good friend Lynn Munn flew up to help me move

in. Lynn is the sort of person who makes sure every box is unpacked and every picture is

hung before anyone goes to bed that first night. We were up at 6:00 a.m. I went to the

bathroom to put in my contacts and promptly washed one down the drain. I shut off the

water immediately and knew that the contact was probably caught in the trap. We called

the Navy stewards who manage the vice president's residence. They said perhaps they

could call a plumber or someone else to help later in the morning. Gampy heard all the

commotion and, still in his bathrobe, went downstairs, got a wrench, came back up to the

bathroom, and proceeded to take off the trap and rescue my contact. Lynn later said that

any man who would take a sink trap off for his daughter-in-law at six in the morning

without a word of complaint deserved to be president.

We moved into our town house, and George began working on the campaign.

After his father lost the Iowa primary, George flew into D.C. exhausted and, dropping his

bag in the hall, said, "Well, we may be going home soon. But just where is home?"

Gampy won New Hampshire, and we stayed. But we stayed on a bit like

squatters, aware that every day was temporary, that November would come, and soon

after, win or lose, we would return to Texas. We were tourists that year, visiting the

Lincoln Memorial in the Friday night dark, heading across the Potomac to George

Washington's Mount Vernon home on Saturdays. We ice-skated downtown with the girls,

watching them spin and fall in the now vanished rink near the old Willard Hotel. Once

Jenna spun and crashed into a wall in front of a reporter for *The Dallas Morning News*.

The girls were five years old when we arrived, and I enrolled them in the local public

school, Horace Mann Elementary, where their teacher was Ms. Davis, an AfricanAmerican woman from Midland, Texas. We walked to school each

morning, past the

cherry blossoms and the dogwoods and the flowering trees that leafed out each spring.

Many of our Texas friends came to visit and brought their children, and George

and I would chauffeur them around for weekend tours, until we knew the monuments and

memorials and the Mount Vernon gardens almost as well as the cross streets in Midland.

Because Gampy, as vice president, was also president of the Senate, we regularly toured

the Capitol and ate in the Senate Dining Room, where prices seemed to have frozen circa

1962 and where my father, during a visit, gladly reached for the check. We even got that

coveted state dinner invitation to an evening in honor of President Chaim Herzog of

Israel. But what was more unexpected for George and me was the relationship we formed

with his parents amid the whirling chaos of a presidential campaign.

When I married George, I had thought that I would be embraced by his mother

every bit as much as he was embraced by mine. I had planned on being more a daughter

than a daughter-in-law, but Barbara Bush had five children of her own. She was their

defender first. What I came to see ultimately as our bond was that we both loved George,

and the depth of our love was what we had in common. Beyond that, we had little

contact. I saw her during those harried Maine vacations, when the onslaught of adult

children, their spouses and companions, and then their children often drove her to

distraction--she is only partially kidding when she says that, when all else fails, follow

the directions on the aspirin bottle: take two and keep away from children. I look back

now through album photographs, at everyone grouped together, smiling gamely for the

camera, and someone always looks as if he or she is about to cry. In a number of photos,

the person on the verge of tears is Bar.

But from the start, she was also ferociously tart-tongued. She's never shied away

from saying what she thinks, right up through Gampy's jump out of an airplane on his

eighty-fifth birthday, in June of 2009. He was set to land on the lawn next to St. Ann's

Church in Kennebunkport, and Bar said, "If the jump doesn't go well, it will be

convenient. We can wheel him straight into his eternal resting place." I was with Bar in

the mid-1990s when people would come up to us in a store or a restaurant in

Kennebunkport and say, "I know you," thinking they'd met her somewhere, and her

response was "No, you don't. You don't know me." She's even managed to insult nearly

all of my friends with one or another perfectly timed acerbic comment. Once, one of

them, Lois Betts, called her on it, and Bar was truly chagrined.

After our wedding had passed, I barely heard from Bar, until 6:30 one weekday

morning a few weeks after George's losing campaign. His brother Neil had moved to

Midland to help out on the race and, when the election ended, had returned to Houston,

leaving most of his belongings behind. Now Neil was off to graduate school, and Bar

wanted me to collect Neil's things, box them up, and ship them to Houston. With that, she

was off the phone. I had my marching orders, and I was fuming as I drove around

locating Neil's things in the places he had stayed, as well as rounding up big boxes from

the supermarket. There were no pack-and-ship stores back then. I gathered, folded, and

boxed everything, and carted it all to the bus station, irritation washing over me. Of

course, here I was, the girl who had longed for brothers and sisters, who had always

vowed that I would never be like my friends and complain about a sibling, and now I was

doing precisely that.

So I was a bit apprehensive about moving to Washington, where we would be

living within walking distance of the senior Bushes and George would effectively be

working for his dad.

But a decade after my marriage, Bar Bush and I finally got to know each other.

We both loved reading and shared our favorite books. One morning, just as I had finished

reading a review of a new art exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts,

my phone rang. It was Bar, who had just read the same review and wanted to rush down

and see it. By 9:00 a.m., we were out the door, en route to the gallery. And Sundays

became our family days. No matter how frenzied the campaign trail, both Bushes made

sure that they were home together in the vice president's residence each Sunday

afternoon. George and the girls and I would walk over for Sunday lunch. After years

apart, George's parents got to know their son as an adult, and we had a window of time

for us to be a small family, two people from each generation. The girls got to know their

grandparents not as flickering images on a TV screen but as people who loved them.

Gampy pushed them in a wooden swing hung from a tree on the grounds, and on rare

nights off, he and Bar volunteered to babysit. At last, I saw Bar for who she is, a funny,

warm woman and a mother who is devoted to her husband and her children. Away from

that overflowing Maine summer house and the conventions and inaugurations, those

high-profile, high-pitched events where Gampy's political career was on the line, Bar and

I came to know and love each other.

We still had plenty of high-profile events to come. The entire family gathered for

the Republican convention in New Orleans, where Jenna and Barbara had the most fun

swimming in the big hotel pool and watching *Ghostbusters* on the hotel television. That

fall, we all hit the campaign trail. The girls and I joined Gampy for one trip on

Halloween. In between plane stops, the crew cued scary music over the loudspeaker, and

Barbara was dressed as a vampire, Jenna as a pack of Juicy Fruit gum. They trick-ortreated down the aisles among the unprepared press corps, who dug into their pockets to

hand out pennies, pieces of gum, and a stray Life Saver or Cert for their sacks.

After eight years of Reagan-Bush, it was now George H. W. Bush at the top

alone. Gampy won his election. I remember Jeb Bush saying a year or two later, "How

great is this country, that it could elect a man as fine as our dad to be its president?"

For George and me, it was time to find a new place to call home.

When we married, George could recite the lineup from leading major-league

baseball teams circa 1950. He can still do it today. His great-uncle had been a part owner

of the Mets, and while George worked in oil, he had dreamed in baseball. One of his

favorite movies was *Brewster McCloud,* simply because the lead character lived in an

apartment in the walls of the Houston Astrodome. One evening, he burst into our house

in Midland and announced that the Astros were for sale for $17 million. But George

couldn't trade oil leases for the Astros the way he had for furniture, and what he had to

trade wouldn't have gotten us much beyond a couple of pairs of season tickets. His

baseball dreams were lived over the airwaves, and the Astros tortured us from the

sidelines. When they made the playoffs, George would race home from work and we'd sit

on our bed and watch the Astros raise our hopes and then dash them, inning after inning,

game by game. Growing up in Midland, I did not follow baseball all that much; my father

had bet on football, and for years, Texas didn't have its own baseball teams. People

rooted for Chicago or St. Louis, franchises in other places. But my dad did take me to

watch the Lee High School team when it made the state championships in Austin, and

baseball games were a kind of background music to our life in Midland. In the sweltering

summer heat, there was always a radio humming in a corner with the game. But it was

with George that I learned to love the intricacies of baseball.

One of George's partners in the oil business was a man named Bill DeWitt, whose

family had owned the Cincinnati Reds back when owning a baseball team was more of a

mom-and-pop business. When George and Bill got together, they would spin a world in

which they owned a baseball team and could sit in the stands to cheer for it. Like Kevin

Costner in the middle of those rows of Iowa corn, they had their own little field of

dreams.

When the Texas Rangers came up for sale in the late fall of 1988, Bill DeWitt was

on the phone.

Suddenly, he and George were putting together a group to buy the team, and we

were moving to Dallas. It wasn't politics; it was sports and a game we now both loved.

The first thing I put in my desk calendar each year was a list of the Texas Rangers' home

games, and we sat in the stands for nearly every one.

There is a loveliness to baseball that is only found in a stadium, that never quite

conveys across the coaxial cables and pixels of a television screen. In a world of

hyperspeeds, the game is long and slow and methodical until some explosive hit sends

the players on the field into utter pandemonium and brings the crowd to its feet. And

baseball was one of the few activities that could draw us outside in the summer. Dallas

summers are woven out of crushing heat, weeks of one-hundred-plus-degree days that

begin cooking the concrete the first minute after sunrise. Except for those brave or robust

enough to work outside, most of the city moves among air-conditioned homes, cars, and

office buildings, where the climate is always a preset seventy-two degrees. Baseball

forces a person to confront the elements and the weather; it forced us into nature. And at

night, under the floodlights, sometimes a brief touch of cool would descend, and the

innings would drift past us as we sat behind the batter's box. I could talk to George, talk

to the people sitting around us, and watch the game. In the stands, we cemented rich

friendships with our partners, Rusty and Deedie Rose, Tom and Susanne Schieffer,

Roland and Lois Betts, Tom and Andi Bernstein, and our cousins Craig and Debbie

Stapleton. In the summers, I loved to take the girls. Often, by the seventh inning, they

would retreat to an unsold suite above, and when the sounds of "Cotton-Eyed Joe" came

over the loudspeaker for the seventh-inning stretch, I would turn and look up at them,

holding hands and dancing the two-step in that empty box.

Those nights were like prolonged exhalations, as we looked out on the grass and

the mound and the sandy baselines.

George was passionate about getting more fans to the games. He spent the offseasons traveling to small Texas towns to talk to local chambers of commerce and Rotary

clubs, to make the Rangers their home team. The Rangers put George's face on a baseball

card, and little boys asked him to sign their cards, and George would always say, "Where

are you from?" waiting to hear Plano or Corsicana, or Waco, or Texarkana, but they

almost always answered "Texas." They were just Texans.

I settled into Dallas life, decorating our three-bedroom ranch house with a little

converted garage for guests in the back. My days were filled with the girls and their

friends and activities. I devoted hours to Preston Hollow Elementary School, which

Barbara and Jenna attended, signing up for the PTA and driving car pool with other

moms on the surrounding streets. The parents of our daughters' friends became our good

friends as well. We spent our Sunday mornings worshiping at Highland Park United

Methodist Church, at the edge of the SMU campus and where I had once taught a Sunday

school class during college. I volunteered to help my friend Nancy Brinker with fundraising for the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. For several years, I chaired

the invitation committee for her annual luncheon gala in Dallas, which was probably the

easiest job in the organization because attendance at the lunch was so coveted that people

RSVPed for it long before we mailed any invitations. I was also invited to serve on the

Dallas Zoological Society and Aquarium board and the Friends of the Dallas Public

Library.

Yet while we lived a very regular day-to-day life in Dallas, our eyes were never

far from George's dad in Washington. George was assigned a Secret Service detail; we

spent Christmas in the woods of Camp David, and our names were now on the guest lists

for lofty state occasions. But for the family of a president, there is another side. In August

of 1990, the Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait. George's dad had

suddenly become a wartime president. We agonized for him. I can remember standing

clammy and afraid in my kitchen, cooking dinner as the television showed President

Bush announcing that he was sending troops to Saudi Arabia in response to the Iraqi

invasion. We saw his lined and weary face at Christmas. Not long after, the media

reported that the U.S. military was shipping tens of thousands of body bags to the Middle

East. Even the quick victory and the Iraqi army's capitulation in Kuwait did not dim the

private agonies he had faced sending young men and women into combat in harsh,

unforgiving sands halfway across the world.

After the Gulf War, Gampy was wildly popular. But the conflict had taken a toll.

That spring, like Bar before him, he would develop Graves' disease, a thyroid condition.

They both wondered if it was caused by some contaminant at the aging vice president's

house. Gampy's mother was in faltering health, and he had a primary challenger in Pat

Buchanan. The Democrats nominated the young Arkansas governor, Bill Clinton. But

that was not the only opposition. The Texas billionaire Ross Perot joined the race as an

independent. The epicenter of his campaign was Dallas. Perot opened a campaign office

in an empty savings and loan building on a corner of Northwest Highway, directly in the

line of sight from George's office. George would look out his window and see people we

knew, people who were our friends and his dad's friends, walking into Ross Perot's

building. He watched them walk in and essentially abandon his dad.

Day after day, we saw George's father mocked and mischaracterized until we

couldn't recognize the man we knew. Even the ballpark was not immune. It had always

been the one place that was not political. But during the fall campaign, when we came to

sit in the front row by the batter's box, someone on the other side of the field dropped a

painted sheet over the infield wall with nasty comments about President Bush. An usher

removed it, but the damage had been done. That moment was a harbinger of other, larger

things.

With the vote split three ways, in November 1992, Bill Clinton was elected the

forty-second president of the United States.

We had our last Christmas at the White House. Aside from a quick trip to visit

George's brother Marvin or his sister, Doro, I did not expect to see Washington again.

George signed up for the January 24 Houston Marathon. As the District of Columbia

swept up after the Clinton inaugural revels, he was one of five thousand runners looping

around Houston. When the marathon was over, a new thought began to jell in his mind:

the Texas governor's race. The election was more than twenty months away. He

announced his candidacy in November of that same year, 1993. It was almost a mirror of

his father's race. Ann Richards, the incumbent governor, was extremely popular. George

was something of a known name but a political unknown. But he believed she was

vulnerable. He based his campaign on education. I listened, and I believed in him. From

the moment he raised it with me, I never doubted that he would win.

As painful as it was for his family, George H. W. Bush's loss had finally freed his

own children to say what they thought and to go after their own objectives. George's

brother Jeb was running to be governor of Florida. Both brothers had uphill battles in

their election races, but both believed deeply in the responsibility of public service and

were also fascinated with politics and public policy. And both were going into the family

business. They were interested in politics because they so admired their father, and

politics had been his vocation. Just as some sons follow their dads into medicine or

carpentry or business, they were following their father into his main profession, public

service and political office.

Now, in addition to Rangers home games, our lives were fixed on the lodestar of

the Southwest Airlines flight schedule, from the first breakneck race of wheels along the

tarmac toward takeoff in the morning to the last screech of rubber and reverse thrust at

night. George was campaigning all over Texas, but because many of the events were in

the day and so much of the travel involved flying, he was usually home for dinner,

lending a refreshing bit of normalcy to our lives. To reach the smaller towns, he flew on a

twin-engine King Air plane with four seats, one of which was a bench. The final seat in

the back doubled as the plane's toilet, and after George received the nomination, that was

where staffers or Texas state troopers had to sit on the cramped flights that leapt and dove

amid the frequent turbulence. I did events as well, speaking to women's groups all around

Dallas and sometimes joining George on the statewide hops. And when I wasn't his

surrogate, I was the mother of two eleven-year-old girls, with their myriad of activities,

friends, and preadolescent dramas. All the while, back in Midland, my father was slowly

dying.

In the winter of 1974, Johnny's Bar-B-Q had developed a leak in the roof. Daddy

climbed up a rickety ladder to see if Johnny could pour a concrete roof, and when he

stepped back on the ladder to come down, it gave way. Daddy fell and broke his ankle so

badly that the doctor on call at the Midland hospital told him he would heal faster if the

foot and ankle were amputated because the ankle is such a low circulation point and

difficult to mend. Daddy kept the foot, and it did heal, but his leg was never the same.

Seven years later, he had the lung surgery, and a few years after that, the doctors found a

second spot on his other lobe, so he had another operation, although this time they didn't

need to remove so much lung. He quit smoking then, but I can still remember the day

when he waited in the car while Mother, Jenna, Barbara, and I went to do an errand at a

shopping center in Dallas. We came out and found him dozing, and as he slept, his

fingers had drifted up to his shirt pocket and were trying to lift out an imaginary cigarette.

He was dreaming of his tobacco and of the feel of the paper roll poised at the edge of his

hand.

Mother and Daddy still came to see us all those years. They flew up to

Washington or over to Dallas, where they stayed in our little guesthouse out back. On one

of their last visits, I was standing at my kitchen sink, where the window gazed across our

square of fenced backyard, and I saw them slowly making their way in from the

guesthouse. I watched as, at the exact same moment, both of their faces lifted toward the

sky. Grinning, laughing, they turned to each other, eyes catching, and then they looked up

again. They were happy. No sadness ever unraveled their happiness. In the tiniest thing,

they could find joy. That morning it was our cat, Cowboy, who had climbed up on our

roof. And they entered the kitchen smiling.

What Mother noticed first was that Daddy could no longer fill out the bank

deposit slips. He got all kinds of small checks--$1.50 royalties from an interest in some

West Texas well, a rent check from a bus station that he had built in Odessa--stacks of

checks for minuscule amounts, which were of great comfort to a man from the

Depression. And he had always enjoyed going to the bank and depositing them, until the

paperwork became unmanageable. He would stare at the lines on the forms, a look of

confusion washing over his face. Mother began to make the deposits for him. Then, one

day, Daddy walked in the house, set his car keys on the table, and announced that he was

not going to drive again. He quit forever that afternoon. For years his greatest fear had

been that he would hit someone else's child. He would not risk that for a few more

outings behind the wheel. But now, all the driving fell to my mother. If she did not take

him out, he would not leave the house. She resigned from her ladies' bridge club, which

met in the afternoons, and began to ferry my father around, just as he had done with her

on all those Sunday drives and the expeditions to watch birds, her binoculars in her

hands. She drove him to Midland's indoor mall, where they could walk undisturbed. She

drove him to Johnny's to see his friends. And then he began to fall.

He would get up and start to walk, but it was no longer a walk, it was a rickety

shuffle, as if the electrical impulses in his brain had begun to misfire. He would move a

few steps, and then, instead of going forward, he would start to back up. Then he would

topple back onto the ground. He was a large man and Mother was tiny, and she had a

very hard time getting him up. Sometimes, she would call her neighbor across the street,

and Trey would come, wrap his arms around Daddy's torso, and pull him off the floor.

Gradually, he began falling so often that she had to call the local fire station at the very

end of the street and ask the firemen to come to lift him up. And she was afraid to take

him places because she was scared that he would fall. Their world shrank as Daddy

became more and more housebound. Friends visited. They came to Daddy when he could

no longer come to them. That is one of the luxuries of living a long time in a small town.

We never got a diagnosis of Alzheimer's or a specific form of cognitive failing.

But we saw his mind erode. Once, he asked Barbara to get him some "B & Bs." He meant

M&Ms, but he kept saying "B & Bs." In her ten-year-old way, she understood him and

came out with the brown bag of bright candy just the same. He also started sleeping a lot,

getting up to have his coffee and his breakfast, now minus the cigarette, and then heading

back to bed. But he never gave up his drink at night.

When my mother took Daddy to the doctor, one of the questions on the cognition

test was "Who is the president?" And my father, who had been a Democrat for years,

answered, "Some joker from Arkansas." The doctor looked at Mother with a small smile

and then asked, "Who was the last president?" And Daddy had no idea, even though it

was George H. W. Bush, my father-in-law. I thought then, months before George

announced that he was running for governor of Texas, how fleeting all of this is--our

memories, our moments--how four years in the White House and the millions of still

photos and tens of thousands of hours of videotape that accumulate from the highest

levels of a political career can just vanish amid the death of brain cells. George H. W.

Bush was one of the most recognized men on the planet in the year 1990, and now, three

years later, my own father forgets my father-in-law.

My mother was fortunate that she was able to hire help. Friends and

acquaintances would call with the name of someone who had assisted one of their

relatives, and so she found a man to come in each morning to help Daddy bathe and dress

and then had other people who came through during the day, especially to help her if he

fell. Barbara and Jenna went out to visit that last summer. In the past, they had gone

individually for a week at a time, to get to be the only granddaughter, and the one who

stayed home was, ever so briefly, our only child. But this time they went together. Daddy

still knew who they were, but so many other things had slipped out of his grasp.

In the middle of that same summer, after we'd packed Barbara and Jenna off to

Camp Longhorn, George and I ducked out to a lunchtime matinee movie, *Forrest Gump*.

Just as we were pulling into the parking lot of the theater, the phone rang in the car--it

seems almost quaint to recall those big car phones now, when most of us walk around

with BlackBerries hooked to our hips. One of the campaign staffers was on the line

telling George that Ann Richards had just called him a jerk. "Some jerk" were her exact

words at a rally in Texarkana. George rolled his eyes, shrugged his shoulders, and we

went in to watch Tom Hanks on the big screen. Although it was shocking at the time, and

it didn't help Governor Richards, I look back now and find it pretty tame mud that she

slung.

The campaign's pace accelerated as we neared the big televised debate, which

most observers thought that George had won. As Election Day drew near, I found myself

barnstorming around the state with Bar and Nolan Ryan, one of the great pitchers for the

Rangers. We'd bounce from small town to small town in that cramped King Air plane,

landing on tiny asphalt strips. Nolan finally leaned over and said, "Barbara, you've got on

two different earrings." Bar pulled them off her ears, gave them a glance, said, "They sure

are," then stuck them back on and wore them for the rest of the day.

On Election Day, George donned his lucky tie, and we headed off to vote at

Hillcrest High School in Dallas. He had his Department of Public Safety detail and an

army of photographers and cameramen trailing him. He had everything but his wallet,

with his voter registration card and driver's license; it was sitting on the bureau in our

bedroom. He hustled back to retrieve his wallet, and then the officials waved him into the

booth. And standing there as we entered the polling place was Kim Hammond, the boy

who had been a pallbearer for Mike Douglas and then had nominated me for the Rebelee

Court in Midland, and who had also played Little League baseball with George. I went

over and hugged him. He was now a Dallas police corporal.

That night in Austin, George won his race, while his brother Jeb lost a hardfought vote in Florida to the incumbent governor, Lawton Chiles. Six years after we had

arrived in Dallas, we were packing to move into the Governor's Mansion, one of the

oldest homes in all of Texas. The house was a grand antebellum design, but our actual

private living space was a modest upstairs apartment, small enough that I had to leave

many of our things behind; the den furniture would fit, but not the pieces from our living

room. The cost of storing our possessions for four years was more than they were worth,

so I gave away books to the Dallas Public Library, just as I had done in Midland. I gave

away furniture and clothes. Barbara's room in the new house had once been a sleeping

porch and had enough space only for a narrow daybed. We managed to squeeze a double

bed in Jenna's room but little else.

After the election, Rita Clements, whose husband had served as governor before

Ann Richards, invited me to lunch in Dallas. We sat at our quiet table in Cafe Pacific,

amid the starched linens and solicitous waiters, and she gave me a tutorial on the

Governor's Mansion, which had been built even before Sam Houston was the governor of

the state of Texas. She reviewed the house, the staff, and the things I would need to know

as first lady of Texas, including her advice not to accept any invitations to events where I

would not be the speaker. At the end of our lunch, as the coffee cooled in our cups, she

withdrew a small piece of paper from her purse. On it, she had written a single name, and

she held it up, saying simply, "I do not recommend this person as an employee in the

Governor's Mansion." She never spoke the person's name, and as soon as I had read the

paper, she crumpled it up and tucked it away in her bag. I was struck by her exceptional

discretion, but fortunately for me, by the time George and I arrived in the Governor's

Mansion, the employee in question had retired.

I suddenly had to buy clothes, inaugural clothes and first lady of Texas clothes. I

have never been much of a clothes fanatic. The closest things I have to a uniform are

jeans or slacks, a cotton shirt, and flats. But I was no longer going to be on the political

stage as a daughter-in-law, the smallest possible bit of background scenery for my fatherin-law. I would be standing next to George, and I wanted to dress my best. I went to a

Dallas designer, Michael Faircloth, to make a red suit for the inauguration. As I recall

now, there were at least thirty other red suits in attendance that January day, including

several worn by my Dallas friends.

But before the inauguration, before we moved our reluctant, newly turned

thirteen-year-old seventh graders to Austin and to an entirely new school, we went home

to Midland for Thanksgiving with Mother and Daddy. By this point, it was very difficult

for Daddy even to leave the house. Mother and Daddy's world rarely extended beyond

those few rooms on Humble Avenue that Daddy had built just over thirty years before.

Mother was back in the kitchen, amid the Formica counters. We were sitting in the living

room, with its familiar green upholstery and the glass-top coffee table, when Daddy

turned to me and said, "Who's that?" I looked over to where his head was pointing, took a

breath, and replied, "That's my husband, Daddy. That's George Bush." And Daddy turned

to me and said in an incredulous voice, "You married George Bush?" "Yes." Then he

laughed, his big, deep-throated laugh, and said, "I think I'll ask him for a loan."

Inauguration Day was cool and damp. George's family was all there, but Mother

had come alone. We didn't know how we could ever get Daddy safely around the Capitol,

or how she would manage when I was up on the platform with George. Then, when I

arrived, amid the crowd gathered at the Capitol, I saw a wheelchair at the edge of the

family and dignitary section. Sitting in the chair was an elderly man, the close and dear

relative who had raised Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock from the time he was a little

boy. The Bullock family had gotten him there and had hired someone to push the chair,

and my heart sank. We had not thought to do the same for Daddy, so that this boy from

Lubbock might see his only daughter and his son-in-law become the first lady and

governor of Texas. We had left him home, with a helper and the television. When Mother

returned, he told her, "You're so lucky. You're so lucky that you got to go."

Three months later, in late April, George and I were standing on the grounds of

the Alamo as part of the historic site's annual pilgrimage, a pilgrimage they've held since

1925, in which, after a muted procession, a floral wreath is laid and the names of the

Alamo's defenders are solemnly read from inside the mission's stone walls. My new chief

of staff, Andi Ball, came running up with the news that my father had collapsed and been

rushed to the hospital. Mother had called the Governor's Mansion, which had located

someone on my Department of Public Safety security detail, who had called Andi. I raced

to the airport and boarded the next Southwest Airlines flight to Midland.

Daddy had already been under the care of hospice, which provided tremendous

comfort to my mother and to him. My dear friend Elaine Magruder, a fifth-generation

rancher, had brought hospice to Midland in 1980 with members of her Episcopal church

and later helped start hospice in Vietnam. But on that afternoon, the hospice nurse had

already come and gone. Mother was getting something in the kitchen, and Daddy's aide

was feeding him some soup when suddenly she shrieked. Mother came running to find

that Daddy had collapsed. Hospice was closed; the aide was overwrought, and Mother

later said that she panicked and dialed 911. The paramedics came, with their tackle boxes

of syringes and oxygen, and resuscitated him. He had a pulse, but by the time the

ambulance reached the hospital, his veins had collapsed. They couldn't get an IV into his

arm. He was unconscious, and his eyes did not open again. He lived five more days

before starvation and dehydration took him, early in the morning on April 29, 1995. I

spent those days with Mother in his hospital room. We held his hand, we talked to him,

we planned his funeral and wrote his obituary, the words never coming close to capturing

the man. George and the girls flew in to tell him good-bye. Mother said later that she

would never have forgiven herself for dialing 911 if they had brought Daddy back and he

had lingered in pain. He had a living will. But he seemed not to be suffering until the last

breath departed from his lungs.

Mother had borne the burden of caring for Daddy, but even she did not realize

what a burden it had been. The constant vigilance of caregiving had left her feeling

almost physically ill. It took a full year for the sense of weight to be lifted from her

shoulders, for her own well-being to return. Then she set about tenderly caring for the

house Daddy had built for her, painting, reupholstering the chairs, replacing the drapes

and the cracked kitchen counters, fixing the myriad of things that had gone unrepaired

because it was just too much disruption to have a painter or a handyman come into the

house while Daddy was in decline.

Looking back now, I see other things I wish we had done. Daddy always loved

music. As a boy, he had taken violin lessons, and he used to be teased as he rode his

bicycle through Lubbock with his violin tucked under his arm. Daddy would get off his

bicycle, fight whoever had mocked him, and then go on to his lesson. He loved Glenn

Miller, Glen Campbell, and Jerry Jeff Walker's "London Homesick Blues," and I wish we

had played more music for him during those last few years. Brain researchers say that

songs are imprinted in our memories longer than many other things.

Alzheimer's and dementia more broadly are called "the long good-bye," but to my

mind, they are the sad good-bye. So often, as with our family, we don't say good-bye

when we can. We don't recognize that moment when the person we love still knows

enough, still comprehends enough to hear our words and to answer them. We miss that

moment, and it never comes again. My mother has said that just as a person's joints grow

old, so does the brain. And today, my conversations with my mother have changed. Now

they are reduced to simple talk about the present moment; I cannot ask her what

happened an hour ago or this morning. A recent MRI of her brain shows that the temporal

lobe has shrunk; there is only a gray pall where the bright fluorescents that delineate a

healthy mind should be on the diagnostic screen. The image reads like the results of an

X-ray for a broken arm, except that this is broken irrevocably. Her brain cells have

literally died first.

When I heard those results, a deep grief washed over me. Her mind will never

heal. It is too late for it ever to be again as it was. Too late for both of us.

Daddy's funeral was on a Monday. Later that week, I was back in Austin. My

days were crowded; I did not have too much time to dwell on memories until Christmas,

when we played our home movies of the girls as babies and Daddy's face and arms

flashed across the frames.

And for years afterward, even now, I would dream of Daddy. And in my dreams,

he is well.

In Austin, I no longer drove. My nearly brand-new minivan stayed parked in a

downtown garage for over a year until I sold it--the grounds of the Governor's Mansion

hadn't been designed to include a parking spot. For security reasons, car-pool duties now

belonged to the DPS agents who ferried the girls to school. They heard the banter and the

secrets that were traded in the backseat mornings and afternoons. I was relegated to a

wave good-bye.

When I first went to look at the Governor's Mansion and saw the two small rooms

for the girls, my heart sank, and I said, "Oh, I don't know what they'll do when they have

friends spend the night." The house manager smiled and said, "The Sam Houston

Bedroom!" The bedroom, with its massive four-poster mahogany bed that Houston had

ordered when he became governor of Texas, back in 1859, would be perfect for a group

of teenage girls. And that was where their friends stayed. I never did tell the girls that

Houston's five-year-old son had locked members of the legislature in their chambers and

hid the key. Governor Houston threatened him with a whipping, but still no key appeared.

Only when he promised to have him arrested did Andrew Jackson Houston deliver the

key to free the legislators, and his father was later overheard to say that his son had

bested him at controlling the legislature. I figured we didn't want to try to top that.

The Texas Governor's Mansion is the fourth oldest continuously occupied

governor's home in the nation and the oldest gubernatorial residence west of the

Mississippi River. Even its dust seemed to be laced with history. The house itself is a

large Greek Revival structure, built of buff-colored bricks fired from a clay pit on the

Colorado River. The governor who chose the design was Elisha M. Pease, who had

grown up in Hartford, Connecticut. The house's facade had elaborate scroll columns

rising two stories, but it was also in some ways a thoroughly Texas house, with wide

hallways running front to back to catch a bit of a breeze in the brutal summers--Austin

sits between Dallas and Houston. Like my grandparents' old orange house, this house was

a foursquare design, two rooms off each side of the central hall. But here the ceilings

were high, sixteen feet downstairs and thirteen upstairs, with the kitchen and a set of what

were once called servants' quarters built at the rear.

Governor Pease had to cart in his own furniture to fill the place, and his wife, who

had lived in Connecticut during the construction, lamented how the sun and heat had

parched the grass to brown and killed the corn planted in their new garden. But governors

lived there from then on, as the city of Austin grew up around them. Inside, Sam

Houston, who had fought so hard to make Texas part of the United States, all but wore

grooves in the wide plank floors, pacing at night over his decision to resign the

governorship rather than sign an oath of loyalty to the Confederacy, as Texas's state

legislature had decreed. Along the grand, sweeping staircase leading to the second floor,

the banister is covered with nail holes, from the successful efforts of another governor,

James Stephen Hogg, to prevent his four children from sliding down the great, slick stair

rail. Those children also kept a menagerie of dogs, cats, squirrels, raccoons, and exotic

birds in and out of the mansion.

By the time George and I arrived, most of the rooms in the house were

unalterable. The only place where we might choose the colors or furnishings was the

small family quarters upstairs. The downstairs public rooms, which some 24,000 tourists

walked through on tours each year, were set in mustard and blue and red, with heavy

drapes and a priceless collection of early American antiques, many of them collected by

Governor Bill and Rita Clements and their friends in Dallas. The rules of the Friends of

the Governor's Mansion decree that nothing can be changed. In fact, far less can be done

to alter the Texas governor's home decor than to modify the rooms in the White House.

I set about making our upstairs rooms into a home as I listened to the buzz and

tramp of the tourists below, and people craned their necks to see if we were indeed there.

Once, when Barbara was home sick from school, a tour group paused in the garden right

below her window. The guide pointed out our cat, Cowboy, and then mentioned our dog,

Spot, but couldn't remember the name of Barbara's cat, and I knew she wanted to call out

her window, "My cat's name is India." In our own space, I painted the walls a soft gray.

Three months after the inauguration, the Texas State Capitol was rededicated after

a lengthy restoration. I was tasked to be master of ceremonies for the event, held outside

on the soaring front steps. Former governor Ann Richards was seated next to me, and as

George was speaking, she told me that she had always wanted to add closets to the

apartments and proceeded to draw a blueprint of her closet design for me on the back of a

speakers' program. I did build the closets, although not exactly as she had specified. We

had a tiny kitchen upstairs and only a small space to eat. We ate most of our meals in the

family dining room on the first floor, with a chef to cook for us. It was probably a relief

to George and the girls. When I was the cook, I could make it through about four nights

of dinners. By the fifth, we had to eat out.

We were not totally unprepared for gubernatorial life, and not simply because

George's dad had reached the presidency. Every newly elected governor and his spouse

are invited to attend something called "governors' school," held by the National

Governors Association before inauguration. We got a tutorial in the basics of state life.

Our school was in West Virginia, and the most candid comments invariably came from

the sitting governors' wives. One told us, "If your state troopers will drive you, be sure to

let them. If you get into a fender bender," she added, "it will be front-page news. If your

trooper does, it will be a note in the metro news section."

Twelve days after George was sworn in, we were back at the White House, for

our first official National Governors Association meeting and a black-tie evening hosted

by Bill and Hillary Clinton. Stepping into the gleaming hallways, we had a sense of

nostalgia for the four years there, as well as the comfort of seeing ushers and butlers who

had always been so welcoming. There were reminders too of the awkward intricacies of

larger political life. That first year, at the White House luncheon for the governors'

spouses, I was seated next to Rhea Chiles, wife of the Florida governor, Lawton Chiles,

who had narrowly defeated Jeb Bush in a very tough race the previous fall. Whether the

seating was intentional or accidental, Rhea and I were forced to make polite conversation

as elegant china plates were silently placed and then, after many minutes, briskly whisked

away.

Ann Richards was not married when she was governor, so there had been no first

spouse in Texas for four years. I had a small office in the new underground space behind

the Capitol building, which was across the street from the governor's residence. My space

was a collection of three rooms with tan walls: first, a small, boxy office with my desk;

second, a narrow sitting area, where I placed a couch from our Dallas den that hadn't fit

in the governor's residence; and finally a workspace for the only person on my staff, Andi

Ball. Xerox machines hummed down the hall, and staffers strode past carrying paper

stacks, meeting agendas, and binders stuffed with the business of Texas. But what was

my business? First ladies have innumerable events to attend--luncheons, dinners,

occasions to make remarks for worthy causes--but small talk has never been my forte.

Rita Clements, the state's most recent first lady, had a long list of accomplishments in her

chosen causes: volunteerism, education, historic preservation, and tourism. Where would

my mark be made?

Some of my duties were prescribed, like the annual Texas Historical

Commission's Main Street Program, for which I traveled to small towns with Jan

Bullock, wife of the lieutenant governor; she had taken over some of the ceremonial

responsibilities during Governor Richards's term. Jan and I would walk past the solemn

courthouses and along the newly restored Main Streets, where the 1940s and '50s false

fronts had been pulled down and the old glass-front shops had been restored. On the

streets, we could almost hear the clomp of horses' hooves or the sputter of Model T's or

even the soft hum of brightly waxed tail fins passing down the street. Here, life before the

interstate was preserved.

But others were causes that I could make my own. I started with art, collecting

posters from major Texas museums and displaying them, framed, in an adjacent state

office building so the corridors could have Robert Rauschenbergs, Georgia O'Keeffes,

Richard Avedons, and other works to enhance their sparse monochromatic walls. I held

exhibitions of Texas artists near my office in the new section of the Capitol, painters and

sculptors, abstract and representational, women and men. And Nelda Laney, wife of Pete

Laney, the Speaker of the Texas House, Jan Bullock, and I searched for historic Texas art

that we could add to the Capitol.

The issue of education was a logical choice. I convened a summit on early

childhood development and brain research, inviting top experts from around the nation to

discuss the importance of reading from infancy and family literacy as ways to prepare

students for learning years before they were enrolled in school. We discussed the latest

brain science, unlocking the pathways for how small children learn, the connections their

eager minds can make between sounds and symbols. We explored the ways that their

physical environment--what they eat, how they play, what they do with the adults around

them--molds their school years and their lifelong learning. I remembered my kids all

those years ago at Longfellow and John F. Kennedy and Dawson and wondered how their

lives might have been different if they had come through the school doors ahead rather

than behind. This was my contribution to George's sweeping education reforms, which he

enacted with Bob Bullock and Pete Laney. The summit helped convince legislators to

create reading readiness programs for preschoolers and, for the first time, to add to the

federal Head Start program.

I had, I suppose, an affinity for difficult causes. I made Texas's Department of

Family and Protective Services one of my issues, working to support the caseworkers

who investigate child abuse and neglect, who rise at 2:00 a.m. to answer a police phone

call telling them a child or a family of children must be removed from their home. I had

begun working with CPS when we lived in Dallas, helping with the Adopt-A-Caseworker

program through an organization called Community Partners, which was started by

several of my friends. Caseworkers would literally have children in their arms as they

tried to find clothing, food, medicine, diapers, anything that a child removed from a

house might need. Many of the caseworkers, who earned meager salaries, were spending

their own money to buy these necessities. In Dallas, we started a Rainbow Room, a true

haven inside the CPS building, where caseworkers could find anything from clothing to

car seats, coloring books, and crayons, whatever they needed to assist families in dire

financial straits and children who had been left dirty, hungry, and horribly neglected. The

room was a welcoming place, furnished by the Dallas-based Container Store, which put

up bright Elfa shelves and bins.

In Austin, I helped establish Rainbow Rooms statewide. I remember meeting one

caseworker in Jefferson County, a woman named Dana Stamps, who had removed an

abused boy from his home on his sixth birthday. Toys from the Rainbow Room became

his only gifts, pajamas, underwear, and a set of clothes his only clean things to wear.

Some months after George became governor, an El Paso writer named Robert

Skimin made an appointment to see me in my office. He told me that he had attended a

state book festival in Kentucky and that he had always wanted Texas to have its own

book festival, adding, "You would be the perfect person to start it, since you were a

librarian." I was intrigued, and I called my friend Regan Gammon to ask her what she

thought. She loved the idea and immediately had a suggestion about who should help

organize it, Mary Margaret Farabee. I started making calls. We gathered a committee of

book lovers and authors. We asked to hold the book festival inside the Capitol, where

only legislative business was allowed, and we got permission. To sell our authors' books,

we erected enormous tents on the streets outside, with authors signing their books and

cashiers ringing up whatever was sold. Any monies we raised were to be donated to

Texas public libraries. And authors wanted to come. Larry McMurtry, of *Lonesome Dove*

fame, told a story about how his hometown of Archer City, Texas, did not have a public

library, until he helped start one with some of his book profits. The playwright Larry L.

King said that when he was growing up poor in Midland, the public library had saved

him. His childhood forays into the works of Mark Twain had led him to dream of telling

stories rather than roughnecking it in the oil fields.

But even after all the authors said yes, I was anxious. Weeks before the event, I

lay awake at night and worried: what if the weather turned bad, what if the encampment

of white tents blew over? The same weekend, Austin was hosting a beer festival and a

gun and knife show. One newspaper article quoted an "unnamed" author as saying,

"Great. Everyone'll be drunk and armed." I was worried that no one would come.

We hosted a reception for the festival's black-tie gala at the mansion, with all the

writers, including Kinky Friedman, who came in his big black hat and big black coat, and

chewed on a matted cigar. The next morning, television crews arrived at daybreak to start

broadcasting promotional interviews for the festival, and when George walked

downstairs, Kinky was there again, wearing his same undertakeresque attire, even with

the same cigar clenched between his teeth, talking to the camera. George was convinced

that Kinky had spent the night stretched over the silk-upholstered settee in the living

room.

The festival opened in the House Chamber, and then the authors fanned out to

read in various committee rooms around the Capitol. Outside the House Chamber, as the

events were getting under way, a jackhammer was ripping up the ground. I flagged down

someone to tell the construction crew to stop, but then I began to worry about all the

other things we had forgotten. My head started to pound, and I slipped back across the

street to the Governor's Mansion and got into bed. I was sure the whole festival was

going to be a bust and people would leave as soon as they had arrived. Regan and another

friend of mine, Pam Nelson, came over to the house and found me. They excitedly told

me, "The festival is going great. Come back." So I got up, redressed, and raced back

across to the Capitol. It was standing room only to listen to the authors in the committee

rooms, and there were long lines in the tents. I bought the books of the authors who

weren't selling many copies and walked around. Over the weekend, nearly fifteen

thousand people came to the first annual Texas Book Festival. In its first fourteen

seasons, the festival has given over $2.3 million to Texas libraries.

The next year, the University of Texas Humanities Research Center loaned the

book festival its priceless copy of the Gutenberg Bible to be displayed under special glass

inside the Capitol's Seal Court. Late on Sunday afternoon, as the festival was drawing to

a close, I was walking through a balcony above. For an instant, I looked down. Three

uniformed Texas DPS officers were clustered around the display, bent over the

Gutenberg's pages. In the middle of Texas, they could gaze upon the first book to be

printed on a printing press in Europe, the book that took reading out of the finely

articulated, hand-copied vellum of high-walled monasteries and began to make it a

democratic pleasure.

Even though George was the governor of the second largest state in the nation, I

had considerable freedom as his wife. And there was a great normalcy to my life in

Austin. A couple of nights after dinner, Regan and Billy and I would walk over to stand

at Antone's to listen to Bobby "Blue" Bland, just as we'd always done. Many mornings, I

would walk south on Colorado Street and around Austin's Town Lake (now renamed for

Lady Bird Johnson) with my friend Nancy Weiss. I stood in line alone for coffee in the

Capitol cafeteria or for stamps at the post office, and when people caught sight of my

DPS detail in the statehouse, they swiveled their heads about, looking for the famous

person who must be somewhere about the room. Barbara and Jenna love to tell the story

of the time we were standing in a checkout line at Walmart in Athens, Texas, near our

little weekend getaway lake house, and a woman kept staring at me. Finally, she said, "I

think I know you," and I replied, "I'm Laura Bush," as if, the girls liked to point out, of

course she would know who I was. Her answer was "No, guess not."

Even our family life held on to normalcy. The four of us ate dinner together most

nights, and George routinely helped the girls type and proofread their term papers. When

ninth grade came, Barbara and Jenna opted to go to Austin's large, downtown public high

school.

The second year of George's term was also the year of George's and my fiftieth

birthdays. I've never liked surprises. I was so shocked by a surprise wedding shower in

Austin that it was at least a half hour before I could actually begin to enjoy the party. But

George loves them. So I planned a surprise birthday party for him at the Governor's

Mansion. I invited his childhood friends, school friends from Andover and Yale, friends

from Midland, the familiar and the long-lost. The morning of the party, George and I set

out to pick up the girls from Camp Longhorn. When we got home, he could see the tent

and the tables going up on the lawn, so I handed him the party invitation, but I didn't say

who was coming. We celebrated under the stars with heaps of dripping barbecue, and lots

of toasts. Then the lieutenant governor, Bob Bullock, stood up. Bob, a Democrat, toasted

George as "the man who will be the next president of the United States." It was July of

1996. George hadn't even been reelected governor. But by the following year, talk had

turned to the presidency.

I waited before I weighed in, because I knew both sides of what that decision

would entail.

In 1993, George H. W. Bush had been invited to Kuwait to be thanked by the

nation for liberating them from Saddam Hussein. He and Barbara invited Marvin and

Neil Bush, as well as Jeb's wife, Columba, and me to go along. On the way home from

Kuwait, we stopped in France to see President Francois Mitterrand, who escorted us all

through the recently opened Euro Disney, the Disneyland of Europe, a far cry from my

California visit after a night spent in a sparse roadside motel. This time too I had

"siblings." We rode on Space Mountain; we tried the famous rides and attractions. But at

one point during the afternoon, I was walking ahead with Marvin and Neil, and I turned

around. Behind us was the threesome of Gampy, Ganny, and Mitterrand. But they

seemed larger than life, the way celebrities, when one sees them in person, look like the

animation of a thousand paparazzi stills. In that instant, Gampy, Ganny, and Mitterrand

appeared as fantastical as movie stars ambling through Euro Disney. And they were every

bit as recognizable.

While as the years lengthened, their prominence might dim, but they would still

never sit in a restaurant or a cafe or an airline seat and pass unrecognized. There was no

chance for them to be anonymous again.

One Hundred and Thirty-two Rooms

With Spot and Barney at the White House.

(White House photo)

The Governor's Mansion in Austin has a small lawn and simple gardens. The

place itself is hemmed in by a cross-section of city streets, pinning it to its urban spot

amid blocks of stone office fronts and the slow progression of glinting high-rises. On the

morning of March 2, 1999, a state staffer placed two white metal lawn chairs in the

garden, and others hung a small rope to hold back the crush of television cameras,

photographers, and reporters who had come to hear George announce that he was

forming an exploratory committee to consider making a presidential run. The press corps

is often referred to as a gaggle, as in a "gaggle of geese," but that hardly conveys the

strange divide between the press and the "principal." What most video images and stills

never capture is the sight of the candidate on one side and the crush of the media on the

other, with their voice recorders, boom mikes, and cameras poised to capture his every

movement and his every word.

The announcement of an exploratory committee was, we both knew, the same as

an official declaration. As George himself said, only "a giant thud, a huge yawn," or the

discovery that "it was my mother they were interested in" could derail his presidential

train.

I sat beside George, smiling. But I had been late to sign on to his decision to run.

Politics had turned ugly during his dad's 1992 race with Bill Clinton. I had watched

political opponents and the media draw the most hideous caricatures of George H. W.

Bush until I barely recognized my own father-in-law. I believed in my George, I love

him, and I knew he would be a great president. It was the process in which I had far less

faith.

My escape and at moments my salvation from this particular trail was to come in

the form of nearly sixteen hundred acres of blackland prairie in an extended finger of the

Texas Hill Country, a ranch near a town named Crawford.

My childhood fantasies of El Paso ranchland had matured into a dream of a quiet

frame house on the banks of the Guadalupe or the Medina River, where a slow, gradual

lawn dipped down to gurgling river waters or a meandering feeder creek. I imagined

children or grandchildren playing in its currents and the soft rustle of branches from

clusters of sturdy cypress trees rooted to its banks.

In late February of 1998, George and I went to look at a plot of land in northcentral Texas, almost dead center between Austin and Dallas. It was flat tall-grass prairie,

the bits of flinty range where generations of farmers and ranchers had eked out life with

their livestock. The soil had been plowed generations ago and sowed with rich feed

grasses, like kleingrass and coastal Bermuda, a spiky green blend that spreads in dense

mats across the ground. Ten acres are enough to graze a full-grown cow in the high

summer. All around us as we drove, the land stretched out, not frying-pan flat like

Midland, but with subtle dips and rises. Uncounted millennia of natural events, from

torrential floods to crippling droughts and fast-moving fires, and the migration of ancient

bison, were silently recorded along its contours and folds. Amid the fields and pastures,

there were fence lines and tree breaks and a healthy breeze, but nothing to distinguish this

spot from thousands of other working farms and ranches across the Texas landscape.

Then George drove me in. In the back, the grassland abruptly sheared away into

seven box canyons, their walls covered in steep limestone worn down from water and

ancient geological upheaval. Thousands of years of erosion had left jutting bits of giant

rock, some of which the rain, sun, and wind have chiseled away, until their features

resemble the noses, eyes, and lips of Easter Island's silent Moai figures. Here, instead of

gazing out upon an island, with the white-capped Pacific at their back, they stand watch

over the brush and fallen branches. Below, when there is rain, the creek water runs. In

centuries past, the Tonkawa Indian warriors rested and watered their horses in this part of

the Bosque River and horse thieves hid their bounty along the winding canyon bottoms.

This back edge was what old-time ranchers call "sorry land," uncleared, untamed,

a tangle of brambles and overhanging limbs. Much of it was impassable. We could only

hike to the top ledge and look down. It was rugged and stark. For George, it was love at

first sight. I was far less smitten.

Two months later, the following April, I was driving with Regan and the rest of

my Austin garden club to an event in Fort Worth. We were heading up Interstate 35, and

the land alongside was swollen with green grass shoots and carpeted with bluebonnets

and other wildflowers, bright and plump from drenching spring rains. As I watched the

grasses and the flowers bend in the wind, I realized that this was exactly the section of

Texas where the Crawford ranch was, and that the blooming land was beautiful. We had

money from the sale of the Texas Rangers baseball team. I called George from the car

and said, "Let's buy it."

By August, the land was ours. Scattered around the front half of the sixteen

hundred acres were a small 1940s farmhouse, which faced two diesel storage tanks and a

tractor shed; a livestock barn; and a few other outbuildings. It was a working ranch; the

same family had raised livestock on that spot for four generations, coming out to stake

and settle when this part of Texas was still a place that drew jostling wagon trains and

weary pioneers. From its rear windows, the ranch's little farmhouse overlooked the

grassland and the herd. The same work boots had crossed its threshold at dawn and again

at dusk year after year.

After George won his reelection race for Texas governor in November of 1998,

with 68 percent of the vote statewide, I started work on the modest six-room house,

painting the clapboard siding green, updating the small kitchen, and refurbishing the three

tiny bedrooms. Later, on another part of the property, away from the grazing lands and

closer to the steep canyons, we planned to build a real ranch house with a two-bedroom

guesthouse alongside, but until that house became a reality, we needed a livable home

where we could stay.

Then my eyes turned to the grassland. In 1999, as George was weighing his

presidential run, I embarked on a prairie restoration. I found a native-grass expert,

Michael Williams, and we began by planting native grasses along a strip at the edge of

the old cattle watering hole that we were making into a small lake. The wild and rangy

grasses took, so we searched for other spots where we could expand the grassland. We

planted on a rise above the pond, and in early 2001 we turned our attention to a vacant

pasture. Michael devised a plan of plowing up the nonnative grasses. Then in spots we

sprayed the fallow soil with small bits of herbicide to kill a few stubborn sprigs of coastal

Bermuda and Johnson grass whose roots clung to the soil even after the plow's metal

blades had sliced and scored the earth. Finally, after four years of plowing and spraying,

only the loamy ground remained. Michael seeded the land with native seeds from a tiny

remnant of an intact prairie. We covered forty acres with seed, and in our final year of

seeding, 2007, the rains came, fifty-six inches of them. The grasses took, and the prairie

returned. We then began adding another forty acres of native prairie grassland. Susan

Rieff, head of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, has noted that our little project

is the largest private, completely native prairie restoration in all of Texas. I feel a twinge

of sadness when I think of the millions of acres across West Texas that were once alive

with tall prairie. Big bluestem, Indian grass, and switchgrass have vanished from the

landscape as thoroughly as the thundering buffalo herds.

The rhythm of a national campaign is the rhythm of the air, of planes pulling

away from the ground as everything below recedes. Our first official flight of the 2000

presidential campaign was a June 1999 trip to Iowa. We left the Austin airport on a TWA

charter plane that had been christened Great Expectations.

We touched down in Cedar Rapids and headed for a country barbecue, past the

rolling farmland turned emerald and gold by the sun and dotted with old, white-painted

farmhouses and red barns pressed against their stout silos of grain. In countless small

ways, the iconic images that we have of so many regions of the nation are in fact true;

rural Iowa is on certain afternoons a Grant Wood painting come to life, the layers of

landscape, the geometric curves of the hills, the thin slices of valley, all resting against

the flat backdrop of blue sky.

In a presidential campaign, the candidates, their spouses, and their staffs come to

know three states--Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina--with surprising intimacy,

because of the early primaries and caucuses and the amount of time and resources

devoted to each of those states. I soon recognized the corners of the rectangular grid

streets of Des Moines and the glittering lights of its suspension bridge, which straddles a

river where the Moingonas Indians once built burial mounds for their dead. George and I

and our staff came to know the tangy taste of Iowa pork barbecue, as opposed to the spicy

taste of Texas beef, and we could smell the sweet corn ripening in the fields. Although

Des Moines was founded as a fort, Iowa for generations has been a largely pacifist state,

without major military bases, unlike Colorado or Texas or Virginia or even California,

which have vast military installations and defense industries. Like their land, the people

are plainspoken and direct, solid in the questions that they ask and the stories that they

tell. And, as I had during George's ancient race for Congress across West Texas, I loved

listening to their stories. The difference now was that the clock was tighter; there was

always another event, another school visit, or another speech. When I was on the road, I

lived under the shadow of the schedule--arrivals, handshakes, greetings, remarks,

questions and answers, and the quick dashes to the local airport as we headed on to the

next stop and town. That tapestry formed the outlines of our days.

Campaigning for office is like running a marathon, day after day. You wake in

darkness and sleep when the local news anchors are just signing off. You sleep in motels

and hotel chains, on a hard pillow one night and a soft one the next. Or you sleep upright

on the plane itself. Your life is packed between the two sides of a suitcase. Bar Bush once

spoke to a group of Motel 6 owners and told them that people think she has Ritz-Carlton

written all over her, but in fact, she's spent far more nights in a Motel 6. To be on the trail

requires tremendous physical and emotional stamina and energy. It helps to have solid,

robust health, which is what I have. George and his father have their athleticism to carry

them through; Bar also has extraordinary stamina. Even the press sometimes has it easier

than the candidates. If a reporter catches the flu, he or she can hop off the trail for a day

or two to recover. But not the candidate. If George or I got that same flu, we couldn't get

off; we had to keep traveling to every event. I think even now of the senior Bushes

standing next to Kitty Dukakis, wife of Michael Dukakis, who ran against Gampy in

1988, and how she always seemed so frail and wan.

This constant life on the road meant that I missed things too. I missed Barbara and

Jenna's high school senior homecoming ceremony. At halftime, during the big school

football game, Barbara was going to be crowned homecoming queen, but she didn't know

it. Austin High had called me that afternoon to tell me in secret, so that I could be there.

Instead, we were heading for the airport. The only person I told was George's personal

aide and our dear friend, Israel "Izzy" Hernandez, who had been with George and our

family since 1992. Izzy tried to get her to dress up, but Barbara went off to the game

wearing flip-flops.

But we always came home. Not simply to the Governor's Mansion, which was

temporary, but to the land of Prairie Chapel Ranch, which we named for the tiny, historic

chapel down the road. (George's first suggestion had been the Lazy L. Ranch.) In 1999,

on the recommendation of my friend Deedie Rose, George and I selected David

Heymann, associate dean of the undergraduate architecture school at the University of

Texas at Austin, to design what would become our new ranch house. On Saturdays, we

drove out with David and walked the property, imagining. David's gift was siting a home

where it would have the best views, the best breezes, the best flood of sunlight. One

afternoon we paused in view of the cattle tank, the low, flooded spot where the ranchers

had watered their herd, the same damp place that we wanted to dig out to build a little

lake for fishing. Along a small rise stood a cluster of large, old live oaks and cedar elms.

There was just enough space to situate the house in the middle of those gnarled trees.

And we did. We lost only one small tree, which we tried to move, but its roots had spread

wide and shallow over the limestone shelf that lies hidden underneath the soil. In David's

vision, every window of the house would frame a live oak or a cedar elm.

Then came the design. On our visits, David would hammer stakes into the ground.

We would stand and imagine each room and feel the ruffle of the wind. The house itself

is split, in the style of old Texas ranch houses, with a breezeway--or what they used to

call a dogtrot--running through the center. When early Texans built a house, they would

have a covered porch open to the breeze, so they could work there in the heat of the day,

with the prevailing winds drawing through to provide some cool.

Our own entry hall has wide screens to capture the wind, and doors that open into

the living room to usher through the breeze. I wanted the house to be low and to fit into

the landscape. It was only when the house was nearly finished that my friend Peggy

Weiss came to look at it and observed that what we'd built looked "like a Midland

house." And it was, only a single story and following the ground, just like the houses

Daddy used to build.

It was never designed to be a big house. It's less than four thousand square feet,

with three bedrooms, one for us, one for Barbara, and one for Jenna. There's a small

library, a sitting room off the girls' bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room and dining

room combined. We wanted the house not simply to fit into the landscape but to be of the

landscape, so we used Lueders limestone from a quarry that was about forty miles away,

and we chose the top and bottom pieces of the quarry cuts, the ones with streaks of color.

Those are considered the discard pieces because most builders want only the creamy

white centers. But the leftovers are feathered with warm streaks of ocher and rose and

look like the burnished tips of prairie grasses. We used a local builder called Heritage

Homestead for everything. When we wanted a cantilevered porch roof without columns

that would obscure the view, they knew just how to engineer it.

Because water and power are always precious and scarce on the range, we also

built the house to conserve whatever we could. A sloping metal roof of galvanized tin

shunts rainwater into a giant underground cistern to irrigate the property. Even the water

from our showers is recycled and saved. Our heat is geothermal, from pipes dug three

hundred feet into the ground, where the temperature is a constant sixty-seven degrees.

We have a heat pump to circulate the water, warming it in the winter, cooling it in the

summer, when it comes from the sun-baked ground. The floors are poured concrete or

wide plank wood, and we did not build a single stair. We want to live at that ranch when

we are in our walkers and our wheelchairs, should that day ever come.

As the presidential primary season unfolded in 2000, slab was being poured and

walls were taking form. We were building for the rest of our lives.

I had what some might consider an advantage: George and I had been in national

campaigns before, four of them in total, two vice presidential, two presidential. We had

leapfrogged up the Mississippi River, from New Orleans to St. Louis to Dubuque, over

the course of three weekends. I had stood for hours at rallies and conventions, I knew the

feel of sitting on hastily arranged hotel banquet chairs for a speech or the echoey roar of a

civic center auditorium, or the slick treads of school gymnasiums, their gleaming,

varnished floors itching not for political events but for basketball. But all those years, I

had always managed to duck the spotlight as a daughter-in-law. Now this was our race, to

win or lose. I frequently traveled with George, but I also made some swings of my own,

including up to Michigan in the already chilly mid-November weather. I visited an

elementary school, then walked around the quaint Bavarian-style town of Frankenmuth,

with its half-timber architecture, home to the world's largest Christmas store, and saw the

struggling industrial city of Saginaw. That night, the sky lit up with a meteor shower, and

Andi Ball and I and my DPS agents gathered up blankets and lay out on the ground

beneath the chill sky to catch a glimpse of the distant sparks of falling stars.

It was in Michigan again that I lost my contact lenses in my hotel room before a

speech and spent what seemed like an hour blindly crawling around on my knees, feeling

the rough carpet for the hard plastic case. At last, Andi located them behind the chest,

where they had slipped during the night. After that, we started carrying spares.

When George won in Iowa, we packed up and headed for a bruising campaign

amid the snows of New Hampshire, where we made lifelong friends. We had a core

group who trekked to every rally. Some had known Gampy when he was running, but

many were just our friends, like Senator Judd Gregg and his wife, Kathy. Senator John

McCain won the New Hampshire contest, but the next morning, we were in South

Carolina, shaking hands and asking for votes.

I was in Providence, Rhode Island, in March when the *Star* tabloid published a

story about the 1963 car crash. The car accident was not a secret; all of my old friends

knew about it, as did just about all of Midland. But up to now, it had been part of my

private life. Except that there is no private life for a presidential candidate or his or her

spouse. Now the accident was fodder for the national media, and for several days

reporters hollered questions at me wherever I went. But then the next piece of news

pushed my past out of the headlines. My life veered from rallies, school visits, and

speeches to the angst of two teenage daughters trying to decide on which college to go to.

Barbara selected Yale, in part because she would be the fourth generation of the Bush

family, and the first female, to attend. Jenna had her heart set on the University of Texas

at Austin. As she told me when she went to visit a North Carolina school, "I wish I could

make myself go here, but I can't." She was overjoyed when her acceptance letter came

from Austin.

They were graduating high school with a father who was the governor and who

was now the Republican presidential nominee. We had traded our Texas Department of

Public Safety detail for Secret Service. We drove in motorcades with flashing lights and

sirens, traffic shunted to one side. Days and weeks collapsed into a blur, rather like the

towns and countryside we passed, moving at warp speed outside the window. Our

advance team, the small group of people who manage each campaign stop, would be on

the road for months at a time, traveling across the country to preview and organize the

events, speeches, and rallies. They did laundry in local Laundromats, and when the

seasons changed, their families boxed up and shipped a fresh set of clothes.

In the late summer, George invited Dick Cheney to the ranch. Dick had been a

longtime Wyoming congressman and Gampy's secretary of defense during the Gulf War.

George liked Dick's thoughtful, measured demeanor and had asked Dick to head up his

vice presidential search. I had long liked and admired his wife, Lynne, who had overseen

the National Endowment for the Humanities and is an accomplished scholar and author in

her own right.

Dick arrived with crisp file folders and sheaves of paper covering each possible

vice presidential pick. But the more the two men spoke, the more George began to think

that Dick himself was the best partner and candidate. He possessed the perfect

combination of experience in Congress and the executive branch, and he had that clear,

plainspoken, unruffled style of the West, which appealed to us as Texans. He liked to

laugh and was funny, smart, and devoted to his wife, his daughters, and his

grandchildren. Underneath, though, Dick had what George and I would call a quiet

strength. As their meetings drew to a close, George asked Dick to be his running mate.

He agreed, and there were so many times when we were both glad that Dick Cheney was

the nation's vice president.

Our family summer gathering consisted of getting together at the Republican

convention in Philadelphia, where the organizers dropped the confetti when I was

introduced and a heavy layer of ripped paper covered every teleprompter screen below

me on the floor. Only one side of one screen was still slightly visible beneath the red,

white, and blue. I had to rotate my eyes sideways to catch a glimpse of my speech.

There were some things that I insisted upon during the campaign. I insisted upon

leaving the trail to move the girls into their new schools.

When she was a sophomore in high school, Jenna had asked me to reserve a space

for her at the Hardin House, a private dorm at the University of Texas in Austin. Even

when I was heading to college, Miss Hardin's, as it was then known, was the place for

young UT coeds to live. Jenna would live with two other girls in one room--they had all

made their reservations together. We arrived and promptly went out to buy bed risers so

that we could slide the storage boxes packed with Jenna's clothes underneath her bed

frame--the other girls were doing the same. I thought of my own move-in day at SMU,

when Mother and Daddy had dropped me off, remembering our spacious rooms with

their tiny closets and my own wardrobe, which barely took up half of the space. My

suitcase and a couple of boxes had fit neatly in the car trunk. I could still picture my

parents' bemused faces as a girl from Corpus Christi arrived with an entire trailer of her

things hitched up to the back of a large Cadillac.

I left Jenna with her friends and headed up to New Haven for Barbara.

Barbara had already spent a week camping in the wilderness as part of Yale's

outdoor orientation program, which she adored. She arrived for move-in desperate for a

shower, but first we had to get her things up the narrow, Gothic-style stairways of Yale's

centuries-old dorm. We spent what seemed like hours navigating the turns and dark

stairwells, and then came the negotiations with her new roommate over who would get

the bottom bunk. A half hour of my negotiating prowess resulted in Barbara's sleeping on

the top bunk all year.

With the girls in school, I was gone from my empty nest as well, back out on the

campaign trail full-time.

The first presidential debate was to be held in Boston on October 3, at the

University of Massachusetts. When we arrived at the airport, Al Gore's Air Force Two

was already parked on the runway, looking large and imposing. I've always found

presidential debates to be particularly nerve-racking. When Gampy was running in 1988,

George and his youngest brother, Marvin, who lived outside Washington, D.C., were so

nervous during the first debate that they couldn't bear to watch it. They went to the

movies instead. Then every few minutes, they walked out to the theater lobby to call

home from the pay phone and check on how things were going. After about an hour of

that, they gave up and drove back to our house. I spent one of Gampy's presidential

debates in bed with the covers pulled up to my eyes. I always politely turned down any

invites to debate parties, with their uncorked wine bottles and platters of mini quiches and

hot hors d'oeuvres. And now I had to sit, composed and almost expressionless, while

George debated Al Gore. After what had happened to Gampy in 1992, when he had

looked at his watch once during a debate with Bill Clinton, I was afraid even to check the

time. Afterward, I walked up onto the stage to greet everyone. Bar had reminded me to be

sure to walk over and shake hands with the opposing candidate and his wife.

George had gone into the evening trailing in the polls, but his focused answers,

combined with Al Gore's grimaces and audible sighs, changed the dynamic of the race.

George is quick-witted--during the primaries, when he had been asked about his biggest

mistake, he said trading the baseball legend Sammy Sosa. I recall another primary debate

question in Des Moines; the moderator asked, What political philosopher do you identify

with most? I could almost see the other candidates' mental wheels turning--Do I say, John

Locke, or Teddy Roosevelt, or Ronald Reagan?--and then George answered, "Christ,

because he changed my heart." Some of the media and pundits were shocked, but to be in

that room was to feel everyone else groping to follow George's lead.

By the time the third debate was over, George was ten points ahead in the polls.

Now, as the days ticked down, we were trying to cover as many states and as much of the

country as possible before the election. The attacks grew nastier, the tone sharper.

On October 23, I was flying to Wisconsin with Bar, Lynne Cheney, and Cindy

McCain, when suddenly the oxygen masks dropped down. The pilot told us it was just a

precaution because we were experiencing cabin pressure problems. The masks and the

warning were enough for most of us to feel light-headed, whether or not we were in any

danger of running out of air. The plane ended up making an emergency landing in Tulsa,

Oklahoma. That flight was an apt metaphor for this last leg of the campaign. Neither side

wanted to run out of air before November 7.

Five days before the election, the story broke that George had been arrested for a

DUI, driving under the influence, in Maine before we were married. He had never

discussed it publicly, although George had told me about it before we wed, and he had

alluded to it once when he ran for governor. Actually, in some ways, what he said about

those years was worse. He uttered the line "When I was young and irresponsible, I was

young and irresponsible," which always made people think that he had been wilder than

he ever really was. George's dad had been in politics since before George entered Yale.

He knew the stakes; he knew he should never do anything illegal, never do anything that

might disgrace his father. His whole family knew it. And what's more, none of them ever

wanted to. But now, in an election where character was a key issue, the last four days

were being devoted to questions about George's character. I called the girls at school

before they heard the news from someone else. The polls showed that George's three-tofive-point lead had collapsed into nearly a dead heat.

Election night for a candidate's wife is largely about supporting your spouse.

There are no speeches to give, no questions to answer. It is a mime performance of waves

and gestures, and on your face, the look of radiant relief at victory or brave composure at

defeat. I had chosen a royal blue suit to carry me through from dinner to the returns and

whatever lay beyond.

In the final thirty-six hours, we had barnstormed from Florida through Texas,

finally touching down in Austin so we could go back home to the governor's residence

and get up the next morning to vote. Election night, we were slated to eat dinner at one of

Ronnie and Peggy Weiss's restaurants, the Shoreline Grill. The tables were set, appetizers

were ready, but before 7:00 p.m., we got the news that Florida was being called for Gore,

along with Michigan. George and I got up from the table and left for the Governor's

Mansion. Jeb came back shortly afterward and began furiously working the phones.

When the first election call was made, the polls had not even closed in the Florida

panhandle, which is in a separate time zone, one hour earlier than the rest of the state.

Voter News Service had made their prediction based on the morning's and afternoon's

exit polls.

The family gathered in our tiny upstairs rooms at the Governor's Mansion. The

night was dark and rainy. Bar Bush was sitting on the sofa with a needlepoint canvas and

a pair of earphones, listening to a Sandra Brown novel. She stitched and listened, stitched

and listened as the minutes dragged by. I went into the kitchen to make coffee and unload

and reload the dishwasher as mugs and glasses were filled and refilled. Then, a little after

9:00 p.m. Texas time, the networks retracted their calls.

At a little after 1:00 a.m., Florida was re-called for George. George stepped into

the hallway to review his acceptance speech; the cars were waiting to take us over to the

rain-soaked Capitol, and our supporters began leaving their hotels to line the grounds.

Many of our best friends from around the country had flown in for the night. Thousands

more people were already waiting for the man they thought would be the president-elect

to arrive.

Then, at about 1:30 in the morning, 2:30 on the East Coast, Al Gore phoned to

congratulate George and concede. The election was truly over. George hugged me,

hugged his parents and his brother. My mother was on the verge of tears.

Our celebration lasted about twenty minutes. One by one the networks announced

that Florida was again too close to call. An hour after his first phone call, Al Gore called

George back to retract his concession. There was not to be an election night after all.

I looked around our small living room. Everyone was exhausted. After years of

being on the road almost every night of every week, of working so incredibly hard, there

was to be no resolution this night. I walked over to George, wrapped my arm around him,

and said, "Bushie, would you rather win or go to bed?" He looked at me, laughed, and

said, "Go to bed." Sometime after 3:00 a.m., after Don Evans, George's campaign chair,

had gone out to speak to the press and our supporters in Austin, to tell them that he

believed "when it's all said and done, we will prevail," I finally sent everyone off to their

hotel rooms or their homes for what little sleep they could get. We assumed things would

look different in the morning. We had no way of knowing that our election night would

not end for another thirty-five days.

I look back on that recount period as endless and simultaneously brief. I ate, I

walked, I read, but where and what I'm no longer entirely sure. George would grill

chicken or steaks in the little barbecue pit at the back of the clapboard house on our

ranch; I fixed tuna salad for lunch, including for Walter Isaacson, then of *Time* magazine,

when he flew down with his wife to interview George. Most of the details, though, long

ago eroded away, so that all that my mind retains are the barest outlines. Almost the

entire time, we stayed at either the governor's residence or the ranch, detached and

consumed, almost as one is with an ICU patient, looking for signs in the green-tinged

monitors and their endless data streams, waiting for that decisive turn. The final Florida

vote totals from election night had George leading Al Gore by over one thousand votes.

Then the recounts began. I also had the Texas Book Festival to oversee the very next

weekend.

When we'd picked the festival date, no one thought that we would be stuck in a

strange kind of limbo, not knowing whether we would be staying in Austin or moving to

Washington. I hastily redid my speech with the Texas writer Steve Harrigan to include

some jokes about the unfinished election; I hosted the festival and the black-tie events,

and like the tick-tock of a metronome, the counting continued. George and I left for the

ranch, where at least we could look up at the sky and breathe. As with everything else

that November, our new house, which was supposed to be finished by Christmas, was

behind schedule. I watched the workmen, hoping I could will them to finish. The giant

TV trucks followed us. Their satellite antennas pivoted like science-fiction creatures as

they beamed footage of the coarse, sapped fall grasses and our neighbor's barn and hay

pile. Back in Austin, correspondents did their stand-ups within full view of the

Governor's Mansion, their klieg lights blazing on the sidewalks.

When we returned to Austin, there were protesters on the streets, but most of them

were backing George. We saw the golfer Ben Crenshaw and his wife, Julie, pushing their

little baby in a stroller and holding up signs of support. Many of our closest friends were

walking around the Governor's Mansion with signs too. In Washington, Doro, George's

sister, joined the protesters outside the vice president's residence.

But we also knew the vice president's house from George's dad, and I could

imagine the Gores being cooped up in there, high on the hill, waiting, just as we were.

There was nothing to do but wait. On November 7, we already thought we had

won. In the weeks that followed, George was still winning every recount. Al Gore did

have the lead in the popular vote, but that is not how our presidential system works.

Presidents are elected based on winning state electoral votes. If the popular vote decided

who won, then each side and each candidate would have employed a very different

strategy. We, for example, would have tried to turn out as many votes as possible among

the 12 million registered voters in Texas. Four years later, when George won reelection

by more than 3 million votes nationwide, John Kerry's campaign briefly considered a

postelection legal challenge in Ohio, to try to win its electoral votes.

But for this election, it was now up to the lawyers and the courts. The ultimate

decision was out of our hands. Like a baseball batter in the ninth inning of game seven of

the World Series, we had learned to tune out all the extraneous noise. We did not hear the

cheers or the taunts; there was only us, and the whoosh of the ball and the crack of the

wood. Then, on December 12, election 2000 finally came to an end. The Supreme Court

issued two decisions. The first was a 7-2 ruling that the manual Florida vote recount had

violated the equal protection clause of the Constitution because not all ballots were

treated alike in all Florida counties. Some counties recorded unperforated punch ballots

as votes while others designated them as nonvotes. There was no uniform standard. On

what the appropriate remedy to recount should be, the ruling was much closer. By a 5-4

decision, the justices ruled that there was no fair way to recount all the votes yet again

and allow Florida to participate in the Electoral College. The current vote count would

stand. George was declared the winner. Months later, when most of the major media

outlets conducted their own series of recounts, he still won.

The next night, Al Gore addressed the nation, and then George did the same from

the Texas Capitol. George was now president-elect. We had survived the previous weeks

by living in what we called "our Zen mode." Now, although George and his staff had

been working on a possible presidential transition since before the election--as had Al

Gore--I personally had less than five weeks, half the usual time, to prepare for an

inauguration and the start of George's four-year presidential term.

We had last lived in Washington, D.C., thirteen years earlier, when George had

come up to work on his father's presidential campaign. Then, as we drove around the city

in our family station wagon, official motorcades would occasionally pass us. One evening

in particular, we were in our car when George realized that a small motorcade was

coming up from behind. He slowed down, sure we would know whoever was in the

vehicle, most likely Secretary of State George Shultz. As we coasted and waited for the

entourage to pass us, a Secret Service bullhorn blared, "Texas, move along." We, of

course, had Texas plates on our car, and the procession wanted us to hurry up and get out

of the way. Now we were the ones who would be riding in official motorcades.

On December 18, I returned to Washington. I had a new title, First LadyDesignate, and I was going to be shown the White House by Senator-elect Hillary

Rodham Clinton. I knew the White House from Bar and Gampy's four years; I had slept

under the high carved headboard and heavy covers in the Lincoln Bedroom. In the last six

years, the Clintons had also hosted us for official governors association dinners. But that

morning, as I waited at the ornate, gilded Mayflower Hotel for word that Hillary Clinton

was ready for us to depart for the White House, there was a profound difference. My visit

this time was rather like the walk-through of a house on the morning before settlement,

except that a president and his wife do not own the White House. It is the American

people's house. I would inhabit it, like Dolley Madison and Mary Todd Lincoln and

Eleanor Roosevelt and Bess Truman, like Jackie Kennedy, Lady Bird Johnson, Nancy

Reagan, Barbara Bush, and the other women before me. I would care for it, and perhaps

leave a little something of myself behind.

Hillary Clinton was waiting for us on the South Portico. With plans to move out

and to assume her role in the Senate, she had been running late that morning, but in the

press reports, I was the one who was chided for tardiness and for my clothes. That's the

struggle with trying to find news when you have twenty cameras trained on two women

greeting each other at a doorway for a private tea. What seems most interesting is often

mostly wrong. I do remember that when my big, black car pulled up and the Secret

Service agents appeared, they couldn't open the car doors. The agents tugged on the

handles while we stayed stuck inside, smiling gamely, and Hillary stood, waiting

awkwardly. Finally, someone figured out how to release the locks.

Once I stepped out, Hillary was gracious and forthcoming. There is a particular

kinship that develops between the spouses of political leaders. I had it with many of the

governors' wives, and I would continue to have it with former first ladies and the wives of

many foreign leaders. There was a similarity and at times a strangeness to our shared

circumstances that created an instant bond. It is a kinship I felt regardless of political

persuasion, and I felt it that morning at the double-door entrance to the South Portico

with Hillary, as she began our tour of the public house and the private living quarters and

offered me her very candid advice. She even told me that, if she had it to do all over

again, she would not have had an office in the West Wing, that she seldom used it after

the healthcare debate ended. And I do know many women who wonder to this day why it

is still referred to as Hillary's healthcare plan, rather than the Clinton healthcare plan,

when it was done under the auspices of her husband, the president.

Hillary gave me another piece of heartfelt advice. She told me not to turn down

invitations to unique or special events. In the late winter of 1995, Jackie Kennedy had

called Hillary to invite her and her daughter, Chelsea, to the ballet in New York. Chelsea

was in school; Hillary had a full schedule, and, feeling pressed, she declined. In May,

Jackie died of cancer. Hillary said that she had long regretted her choice to stay home and

wanted me to know that story so that I would not do the same.

Joined by Chelsea, Hillary led me through the lower level, sharing with me her

fond recollections of the parties they had hosted in the Palm Room, the glassed-in

conservatory that divides the formal White House from the West Wing. It was a brief tour

through their public and private lives, a whirlwind of parties arranged in the Blue Room,

the Red Room, and the Green Room, until I could almost glimpse the elegantly set tables

and the banquet chairs. But when we went up to the State Floor, both Hillary and I had

forgotten about the public tours. She opened the door to lead me through the formal state

rooms, and we caught sight of a large tour group. She quickly shut the door, but not

before some very surprised tourists got a good look at the outgoing and incoming first

ladies.

We moved upstairs to the family quarters, where at one point Chelsea said,

"Mom, tell Mrs. Bush about the tomato plants," and Hillary led me out on the parapet off

the third floor, where each spring they set out pots of tomato plants, because "you just

can't get good tomatoes." I nodded my head and smiled and thought, Tomatoes? You

can't get good tomatoes at the White House? But George and I also grew pots of tomatoes

on the parapet.

Hillary was thinking about her own future and how much she wanted to buy a

house of her own in Washington, saying that "men keep saying to me, 'You're going to be

a senator, just rent something, and you can find something later.' But," she told me, "that

doesn't work on my time line. I need to be moved into a new house. I need to have a

house." And I understood her completely. If I had been Hillary, I would not have wanted

to wait until after I was in the Senate to find my home.

We were standing in the first lady's dressing room when Hillary paused and

remembered something that Barbara Bush had shown her, eight years before. "Your

mother-in-law stood right here and told me that from this window you can see straight

down into the Rose Garden and also over to the Oval Office, and you can watch what's

going on."

I did look out that window many times over the years, out to the Rose Garden and

around the grounds, always careful to stand just inside the frame so that no one would

spot me. If George was doing an event in the Rose Garden, I could see it from the

window and live on television at the same time.

I finished that day by interviewing potential staff members for my new East Wing

office at the White House. The last candidate had four legs and was ten weeks old. He

was a Scottish terrier puppy, born to a dog owned by New Jersey governor Christie Todd

Whitman, and, of course, I fell in love. I had seen his puppy pictures on November 4, my

birthday, when George and I were in New Jersey on the last leg of the campaign trail.

George hadn't gotten me a gift, and Christie Whitman suggested a puppy. Our D.C.

interview sealed the deal. Barney flew back with me to Austin the next day to join our

animal family. We already had a springer spaniel, Spot, one of the six puppies born to

Bar's dog, Millie, in 1989, when she lived in the White House. Spot was the runt of the

litter, and I can still recall Barbara and Jenna proudly taking their new puppy and their

grandmother, simultaneously, to first-grade show 'n' tell in Dallas. Afterward, the

principal of Preston Hollow Elementary, Susie Oliphant, had the children line the halls so

that Jenna, Barbara, Bar, and Spot could walk past the whole school.

All our animals in Dallas were named for Texas Rangers baseball players. Spot

got her name in honor of the infielder Scott Fletcher, Barbara's favorite player. Of course,

the Rangers almost immediately traded Scott. Our cat was named after Ruben Sierra,

whose nickname, El Indio, gave Kitty her name, La India. And at times, I would look at

our pets and remember our girls and our lives, the family that we were beyond the White

House walls.

For the move to the White House, I packed our clothes, family photos, and a

single piece of furniture, a chest of drawers that had belonged to George's grandmother,

which I thought would fit perfectly in my dressing room. We didn't send another thing. I

knew from Bar that the White House has a huge and exquisite collection of furniture and

art, and that we would leave office with an entirely new book collection, titles given to us

by authors, publishers, and friends. For the trip to Washington, our possessions took up

less than one very small moving van. The rest I planned to send to our ranch, and the

incoming governor, Rick Perry, and his wife, Anita, very kindly waited to move into the

Governor's Mansion until our home was ready, so that the movers could transport our

furniture directly to Crawford.

I do regret now that in those hectic days I never sat down with Anita, the new first

lady of Texas, to give her much of the same helpful advice that Rita Clements had given

me. I never had a chance to walk her through everything, from the house to the

responsibilities; there just wasn't time. Our good friend Jeanne Johnson Phillips was

overseeing the inaugural festivities, and I was being asked to decide on programs, a

prayer service, an authors' event, and of course, clothes. I had not looked at or

contemplated an inaugural wardrobe for me or for the girls before the election was

decided. Now I had barely one month to be dressed, not simply for the inauguration and

the night of balls but for the three days of events surrounding them. And clothes are a big

part of being first lady, dating back all the way to Martha Washington and Dolley

Madison. The Dallas designer Michael Faircloth made me a deep turquoise outfit for the

inaugural and a red lace gown with Austrian crystals for the inaugural night. But I had to

have more gowns and outfits for other inaugural events, and I bought two other long

dresses, one champagne, one deep teal, as well as two suits and a cranberry-colored dress.

Jenna and Barbara bought inaugural ceremony outfits designed by Lela Rose, the

daughter of our good Dallas friends Rusty and Deedie Rose; she also made their gowns

for the Texas Black Tie & Boots Ball the night before. For their official inaugural night

ball gowns, they chose designs by Susan Dell of Austin, a strapless beaded black gown

for Jenna and a V-neck silk and chiffon beaded currant gown for Barbara.

We arrived in Washington, D.C., and stayed, as all presidents-elect do, in the

historic Blair House across the street from the White House, the same home where we

had stayed with Gampy in 1988. When I went to the Lincoln Memorial for a concert to

open the inaugural festivities, my place on the platform was next to the spot marked

"President-elect."

Inauguration Eve began early in the morning with a series of interviews at Blair

House, including a sit-down with Katie Couric, then of NBC's *Today* show. Toward the

end of our conversation, she said to me, "You appear to be a very traditional woman. Is

that a fair characterization?" It was slightly better than the other perennial interview

question, "Are you going to be Hillary Clinton or Barbara Bush?" as if the first lady's role

was like hand-me-down shoes and I had to choose between two previously worn pairs.

But there was, from the start, an underlying assumption on the part of the press that I

would be someone else when I assumed the role of first lady, that I would not, under any

circumstances, simply be myself.

As I had done when George was sworn in as governor of Texas, I planned an

event to celebrate authors. This was to be my "first lady" inaugural party. I was much

more interested in listening to Stephen Ambrose discuss history or Mary Higgins Clark

and Carol Higgins Clark talk about plotting a mystery or having Stanley Crouch and the

Texas author Steve Harrigan discuss literature than I was in attending another large

luncheon or party; and to me, an afternoon with authors was as glamorous as a highheeled, long-gown ball. The Cheneys sat in the front row, along with Bar and Gampy and

my mother and George, who introduced me by saying, "Her love for books is real, her

love for children is real, and my love for her is real." Then I walked onto a stage

decorated to look like a library, and before a crowd of more than three thousand, I spoke

of my passion for literature, saying, "Our country's authors have helped forge the

American identity, create its memory, and define and reinforce our national

consciousness," adding, "Books have done what humans rarely do, convince us to put

down the remote control."

Inauguration Day dawned cold and rainy, but to George and me, the morning was

beautiful. We began with a church service at the nearby St. John's Episcopal Church. The

creamy yellow building held its first service in 1816; its nearly one-thousand-pound

steeple bell was cast by Paul Revere's son. Every president since James Madison has

worshiped there; pew fifty-four is designated as the President's Pew. St. John's became

our Washington church while we were at the White House; it was where we had attended

services in 1988, when George had been working on his father's presidential campaign.

Listening to the sermon and the prayers provided our last moments for tranquil

reflection. From St. John's, we would be whisked from event to event; each second of our

day would be accounted for, and the clock was unyielding.

After the service, we drove straight across Pennsylvania Avenue to the White

House, where Bill and Hillary Clinton were waiting to greet us for the traditional coffee.

The Cheneys came, as did Al and Tipper Gore. Then we departed in our motorcade for

the Capitol, George and Bill Clinton riding in the president's car, and Hillary and me

following behind. As we chatted on the short drive, I thought of how, in most cases, a

first lady's departure day is the start of her retirement. For Hillary, it was the beginning of

her own career. And nearly two years after George had held his press conference in the

garden of the Texas Governor's Mansion, he was going to be sworn in as the forty-third

president of the United States, and only the second presidential son to hold the office

himself. History would now record John Adams and John Quincy Adams and George H.

W. Bush and George W. Bush.

As we rode up Pennsylvania Avenue, I saw a collection of protesters, waving

placards and calling George's election illegitimate. Until that moment, I had thought that

once a winner was formally declared, the postelection rancor would die down, that

everyone would move on. But in the years to come, we found that, for some, the

bitterness remained.

There is no grand entrance to be made for the outgoing president and his

incoming successor. We entered through a side door at the Capitol into a rather ordinary

hallway, distinguished only by two moderately sized gilded eagles perched at the top of

each wall. From there, it was off to an interior room to wait. Outside, invited guests and

spectators had been gathering for hours, even with the rain. Now, with the noon hour

approaching, it was George's time. We began our walk, the same basic route that I had

taken for Gampy's inaugurals and through the spaces where we had strolled with friends

on all those weekend tours. We crossed the sturdy crypt, built to support the soaring

dome of the Capitol Rotunda. Lynne Cheney was my companion; George, as the

incoming president, would be the last to take his place on the podium. From the crypt, we

climbed the stairs to the magnificent Rotunda, ringed by statues and enormous paintings

of Revolutionary War scenes, the landing of the Pilgrims, the discovery of the

Mississippi, and the baptism of Pocahontas. We passed them all as if in a blur; there was

barely time to glance up at the fresco in the dome, painted to glorify George Washington.

George had wanted to use Washington's Bible, the same Bible that his father had

used in 1989, for the bicentennial of George Washington's inauguration as the nation's

first president. The Washington Bible had been specially transported under Masonic

guard from New York to Washington. But we also had a Bush family Bible on hand, the

same one that George had used when he was sworn in as governor of Texas, in case the

weather turned bad. In the end, we would use both, the Bush Bible laid on top of

Washington's, both closed to protect them from the damp, and the continuity of our

national past resting beneath George's hands.

As we left the Rotunda, we walked down a steep set of stairs in a very ordinary

hallway, no decorations, just wide-cut, gray stone blocks bathed in darkness, except for

the blinding array of television lights waiting to illuminate us as we descended. But from

the small doorway, Washington, D.C., was spread before us, the vast expanse of the Mall,

the tall, spare point of the Washington Monument, the wide colonnade of the Lincoln

Memorial, and the blocks of hard granite buildings lining the avenues. Their edges were

soft, as if in a dream, because a cool mist had settled over the city. And even though I had

seen the exact same view three other times, on this day, that sight, for those few seconds,

was uniquely ours.

I tried to savor it all--the oath of office, the inaugural address, the military band,

the friends and family who had come to share the day. For me, the inauguration is the

thing of beauty, the scene that will last when all others have faded away.

After the ceremony, back inside, George paused at the bottom of the staircase

leading up to the Rotunda and tried to hug me and the girls and his parents, but there was

a clock to be kept, and the Senate staffers who oversee the inaugural events were urging

us on. We walked the Clintons out to the limousine that would carry them to Andrews

Air Force Base, where they would depart for their new home in Chappaqua, not far from

New York City. Then we returned for the inaugural luncheon in Statuary Hall, the

semicircular room with the wide, marble Corinthian columns quarried from along the

Potomac River. It was here that the U.S. House of Representatives had met for nearly

forty years, where John Quincy Adams supposedly used the room's echoey acoustics to

eavesdrop on his fellow congressmen, and where he also eventually collapsed at his desk.

In this room too, John Quincy Adams, James Madison, James Monroe, and Andrew

Jackson were inaugurated as president, and the Marquis de Lafayette became the first

foreign dignitary to address the U.S. Congress. This afternoon, I sat next to Senator Mitch

McConnell, the Republican senator from Kentucky, who had overseen the inaugural

events, and we talked about the intricacies of planning the ceremony. I looked out upon

the other tables, catching site of Jenna and Barbara at their first inaugural lunch and at all

our own good friends scattered about the room.

Surrounding us were the statues of prominent Americans from many states. We

gazed out upon marble carvings of Ethan Allen, the Green Mountain Boy from Vermont;

Robert Fulton, who invented the steamship; and also Sam Houston, whose statue had

been carved by the Austin artist Elisabet Ney. She had called him one of "my wild boys."

George and I left the lunch so that he could review the troops, and then we began

the trip down Pennsylvania Avenue to commence the inaugural parade.

Barbara and Jenna were halfway through their freshman year of college. I had told

them to be careful of what they wore on their feet. Inaugural festivities require a lot of

climbing stone staircases, standing on marble floors, standing in general, and then sitting

in a chilly reviewing stand to watch all the wonderfully enthusiastic floats, performers,

and bands from every state in the nation pass. They, of course, chose stiletto-heeled

boots, and by the time they got to the Capitol, they were ready to take them off.

After the parade, where both the Midland and Lee high school bands performed,

as well as the marching bands from my alma maters, the University of Texas at Austin

and Southern Methodist University, there was a brief period to rest and eat a small dinner

before we began dressing for the round of inaugural balls. The unbelievably efficient

White House ushers and staff had removed the Clintons' possessions--Bill Clinton had

told us that morning that, by the end, he was packing simply by pulling out drawers and

dumping their contents into boxes. Then the staff unpacked all our clothes and arranged

our rooms; even our photographs were out on display. The transfer of families is a

choreographic masterpiece, done with exceptional speed.

By now, my feet hurt, but I squeezed them into my shoes. It was painful almost

from the first step. One of my friends from Midland later wrote that she saw women

wearing tennis shoes under their long evening dresses, and that our good friend Dr.

Charlie Younger had lent blue surgery covers to protect everyone's shoes and feet from

the cold and wet. Some of our close friends couldn't get rides back to their hotels after the

balls; they rode D.C.'s subway system, the Metro, in their tuxes, ball gowns, and high

heels.

We had eight balls; the Clintons had held fourteen just four years before. "Ball" is

almost a misnomer for some of these events, which are held in convention centers and

hotel ballrooms with cash bars and are more like cattle calls, where there is barely space

to turn around and no place to sit down. People wait all evening for the president and first

lady and also the vice president and his wife to walk in on a great stage. Each moment is

like a scene from a play, with eight nearly identical performances in a single night. The

inaugural organizers recite the same introduction; the president speaks; and the new first

couple dances the same dance to the same music, waves, and departs for another ball in

another part of town. The fun was actually getting to visit with whoever was riding with

us to the next ball. We had Condi Rice and her date in our limo a couple of times; and

also George's campaign chair, Don Evans, and his wife, Susie, old Midland friends; and

Mercer and Gabby Reynolds, who had helped plan the inauguration. We told jokes and

laughed as the motorcade rolled through the city that was now our home.

For the next inaugural in 2005, I chose my shoes with what I thought was more

care, but they were dyed to match my dress, and they must have shrunk during the dyeing

process. That night, I distinctly remember walking from ball to ball through the

underground corridors of the Washington Convention Center in my bare, aching feet,

carrying my shoes in my hand.

But I loved watching George dance with Jenna and Barbara at the TexasWyoming Ball, and I loved that the people who had worked so long and hard for us had a

chance to celebrate as well. Our theme was "Celebrating America's Spirit Together." It

was not, however, a late night for the new president. We were home before midnight,

quite a change from the previous administration, which relished late nights. Bill and

Hillary had not wanted to miss more than a few minutes of their last day in the White

House, even watching a movie in the movie theater at 2:30 a.m. The fun of that night left

them so tired that when Barbara, Jenna, and I glanced over at Bill during George's

inaugural address, he was dozing.

As we pulled back inside the White House grounds a few minutes before

midnight, George, who was already famous for his early bedtimes, joked to our Secret

Service detail, "This is going to be new for you." And the agent in the front laughed and

said, "Yeah, I'm going to say to my wife, 'Guess what, honey? I'm home!'"

That night, as we lay in bed, the entire White House upstairs residence was

packed. George's parents were down the hall in the Queens' Bedroom, named for all the

royal guests who had stayed in it. My mother was sleeping in another guest room, Jenna

and Barbara were in their rooms, and every other space was filled with George's siblings

and their families, a total of twenty-three relatives, some spending the night on rollaway

cots. But having everyone with us was like the sigh of relief I would breathe back in

Texas when I heard the door open late at night and I knew the girls were home and

headed for bed. That inaugural night, I drifted off to sleep knowing that everyone we

loved was safe, tucked in together under this one, remarkable roof.

The next morning, Sunday, we attended the traditional inaugural prayer service,

decreed by Congress and held since the first swearing in of George Washington. It was

now at the National Cathedral and was a beautiful interfaith collection of music, prayers,

and verse. The Navy Sea Chanters and Larry Gatlin both sang in the musical prelude, and

the service ended with a chorus of "America the Beautiful." We returned to the White

House for a brunch with all of our friends. I was expecting to sit around and listen to their

funny stories of the inauguration, like the blue surgical booties and the tennis sneakers, to

hear about what they did, what parties they went to, who they saw. Instead, we were

mobbed by our own friends, who wanted to snap pictures of us with their families and

children. It was like being at an official event all over again. Our friends flew home, and

George and I went to work, he to the Oval Office and I to my space in the East Wing. It

was years before I got to hear all their stories.

I was grateful for the days we had already spent in the White House with Ganny

and Gampy. Parts of it are warrens of rooms and alcoves and doorways; there are 132

rooms housed inside its walls. At first, my assistant, Sarah Moss, who worked in an

upstairs office in the residence, would get lost just trying to find the elevator foyer. I

might not be entirely certain of what I was going to do as first lady, but at least right

away, I could find the elevator.

As for George, he was shocked when two members of the residence staff, Sam

Sutton and Fidel Medina, introduced themselves to him as the president's valets. George

took his dad aside and said, "I don't think I need a valet." Gampy smiled and told him,

"Don't worry, you'll get used to it."

My first project found me on my first workday morning at the White House. I was

coming down the elevator into the ground-floor Cross Hall as George's close political

advisor Karl Rove was walking toward the West Wing with Dick Moe, head of the

National Trust for Historic Preservation. The National Trust designates and protects

many of our nation's most treasured landmarks. I introduced myself and said that I was

interested in historical preservation and wanted to continue Hillary Clinton's work on

Save America's Treasures, a federal program that had begun in 1998 to protect our

country's leading historical landmarks and artifacts. Its first project had been the

restoration of the 1812 Star-Spangled Banner. Dick was familiar with the work George

had done in Texas to save and preserve the state's historic county courthouses.

I became the honorary chair of Save America's Treasures, and two years later

launched a complementary initiative, Preserve America, which encourages every

community to protect its unique historic assets. My co-chair at Preserve America was

John Nau, a friend from Texas who is deeply interested in preservation and who had

worked to protect battlefields and other important sites from the Civil War. Over

George's two terms, more than six hundred communities in all fifty states and the U.S.

Virgin Islands were officially designated as Preserve America Communities.

But my first priority was the White House itself. I knew what a remarkable

collection of art and furniture the White House had, exceptional pieces by many of

America's best furniture makers, pieces that had been owned by other presidents, even a

collection of campaign bandannas from Andrew Jackson's run for the presidency. I was

eager to start making the White House residence our home. Ken Blasingame, an artist and

decorator, and my longtime friend, came to help me make the private rooms into a home

for our family. Along with James Powell, an antiques expert from Austin, Ken searched

the special, climate-controlled facility that stores the White House collection to look for

furniture from past administrations that would be appropriate for each room.

Each new arrival to the White House finds the residence furnished in the style of

his predecessor. Many rooms remain unchanged from administration to administration.

The Clintons and the Bushes had kept the black lacquer Chinese screen that Nancy

Reagan's much-loved decorator, Ted Graber, had installed in the long, cavernous upstairs

Cross Hall. I kept the cheerful, light fabric that the Clintons had used to cover the walls

of the small family dining room upstairs.

I set up the girls' rooms first, painting the walls a soft aqua and installing two

double beds in each, so that they could have friends sleep over, as they had done in

Austin. Many nights during college breaks and summer vacations we had eight girls

crowded into the two rooms. In Barbara's room, I hung a loaned portrait of identical

twins. My next project was the Treaty Room.

The Treaty Room is quite literally that, a room where the peace protocol to end

the Spanish-American War was signed in 1898 and where President John F. Kennedy had

signed the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty some seven weeks before he died. President

Grant had used it as his cabinet room, and the room had the original Grant administration

cabinet desk, with eight drawers, one for each cabinet member, plus the president. After

the West Wing was built, the Treaty Room was intermittently used as a private

presidential study. George's father had used it as his upstairs office, and I knew George

would like to do the same. Most nights, after we ate dinner, he would head to the Treaty

Room to read his nightly briefing papers and make phone calls. I painted the walls cream

and brought over Grant's original sofa and two chairs from the White House collection. I

wasn't as excited by a room full of Victorian furniture once I saw it arranged, but George

said, "I love having Grant's furniture." He did indeed. There is something special about

knowing that a previous president has used that same furniture in that very same room.

George would gaze up at the famous George P. Healy painting *The Peacemakers,*

depicting Lincoln meeting with his generals Grant and Sherman, and Admiral Porter, at

the end of the Civil War, and he would sense the history that had already happened here.

There is a unique continuity to knowing your predecessors have walked these halls, have

written on these tables, have sat in these chairs. And a particular comfort as well. We

both felt that comfort in the rooms of the White House.

For our first week in the White House, I also had my friend Lynn Munn in

residence. Lynn had helped me move into so many homes, but this time she had stayed in

Washington because her husband, Bill, had suffered a heart attack early Sunday morning

after the inauguration. She and her daughter, Kelly, and son-in-law, Tom, spent their days

at George Washington University Hospital with Bill, but at night they came to stay with

us until Bill was well enough to fly back home to Midland.

In mid-February, I was back in Texas. Our ranch house in Crawford was close to

completion, and I had another move to oversee. I had to unpack our books, hang our

pictures, and stock the cabinets in the kitchen. And I needed to look at the house with a

different eye, for how we would entertain foreign leaders in our newly completed home.

We'd already had our first request: Tony and Cherie Blair were coming to visit at

the end of February, and Cherie was hoping to be invited to our ranch in Crawford

because she had already been to the White House and Camp David with the Clintons. But

our guesthouse next to the main ranch house remained unfinished, so we invited them to

be our first international guests at Camp David instead.

Nestled in the Catoctin Mountains of Maryland, Camp David has been a

presidential retreat since the time of Franklin Roosevelt, who called it Shangri-La;

President Dwight Eisenhower renamed it for his grandson, David. Camp David is a

nickname for Naval Support Facility Thurmont, and it is an active naval base. Marines

and Navy sailors work and often live on the grounds. The camp itself spans 180 acres,

and the presidential section consists of a series of comfortable cabins tucked among the

trees and connected by winding paths. Franklin Roosevelt met with Winston Churchill at

Camp David, Ronald Reagan had invited Margaret Thatcher, and Gampy had hosted John

Major.

Camp David is a far more intimate setting than the White House. It is a place

where you can get to know another leader without the crush of a roomful of a hundred or

so invited guests and an hour or more of receiving lines, with their jumble of announced

names, quick pleasantries, and official photos, which are all but required for formal

White House entertaining. It is a real treat to show off the White House in its full

splendor to visiting heads of state or government, to introduce them to celebrities and

other famous Americans. But entertaining at a place like Camp David, or later our ranch,

was far more relaxed and casual. A visit to Camp David is more like a visit to someone's

weekend place. And it cements a different friendship than simply having a fancy event

amid gleaming silver and glittering chandeliers. We could visit with our guests over

coffee at breakfast, or have dinner and then watch a movie; for the Blairs, it was *Meet the*

Parents. Leaders who came to visit us at the White House stayed across the street at Blair

House and invariably showed up at night on the front steps in black tie.

I was a bit nervous about meeting the Blairs. I knew what close friends they had

been with Bill and Hillary Clinton, and I wondered how we would get along. The British

tabloids didn't help. clash of cherie and dubya's cowgirl headlined *The Daily Record*,

frosty forecast as our modern mum meets bush's little woman at summit. The Brits were

convinced that it would be torture for Cherie Blair to sit down and have a meal alone with

me while George and Tony got to know each other. "Laura is a cookie-baking

homemaker," they wrote, "dull, mumsy, and old-fashioned." At least with the British

press, one never needs to say "Tell us what you really think."

But Cherie Blair and I did hit it off when we had our private lunch in Aspen

Lodge, the president's cabin, while George and Tony Blair and their staffs had a working

afternoon at Laurel, the main lodge. Cherie is funny and smart, and we talked about our

families; her oldest children and Jenna and Barbara are close in age. We enjoyed talking

about topics like women's issues and improving women's health, although what I liked

most about our friendship was the intimacy of it, rather like two busy mothers catching

up over coffee. Cherie is a wonderful reader, and we shared a love of books, and more

than a few favorite authors. She was particularly attuned to the challenges of being an

American first lady. In England, the prime minister's wife has no official title and few

official responsibilities. Cherie was proud of having kept her day job as a barrister in the

British courts.

Early on, George apologized to the Blairs that we couldn't have them to the ranch-because the final work wouldn't be complete until March. The only thing I felt bad about

on this visit was that I don't think the Blairs, Cherie especially, were all that keen on pets.

We, of course, had ferried Kitty, Barney, and Spot to Camp David. I asked Cherie if they

had any animals, and she paused and answered, "Well, we had a gerbil. Once."

The day that the Blairs arrived, I had spent part of the morning with Oprah

Winfrey. There was tremendous curiosity about me as the new first lady, and although I

hadn't really done anything yet, reporters from across the country wanted me to sit for

interviews. *The Washington Post*, *Good Morning America*, the Texas papers, *Harper's*

Bazaar, People, Reuters, the list was long and growing. I was waiting upstairs for Oprah,

who arrived with her best friend and business partner, Gayle King, but before they were

escorted to the upper level, George passed by with Condoleezza Rice, his national

security advisor, and Colin Powell, his secretary of state. My staff later told me that

Oprah was speechless at meeting them. For the first time, the two individuals tasked with

overseeing U.S. foreign policy were African-American. Gayle King had to give Oprah a

little poke to remind her to talk. And I thought later, what a wonderful moment, to have

this crossroads of success in the people's house that was, at the founding of the nation,

built by the labor of unknown and unrecognized slaves.

While we hit the ground running, there were a few mishaps. Saturday afternoon

after the Blairs departed we helicoptered back to the White House to prepare for the

National Governors Association meeting, which George and I had attended for six years

while Bill Clinton was in office. Now it was our turn to play host. Sunday night was the

opening dinner. During their years, the Clintons had invited many of their gubernatorial

friends to spend the night at the White House. We were planning on doing the same for

some of our Republican governor friends, including George Pataki of New York and

John Engler of Michigan. George and I waited for our overnight guests to arrive. Time

passed, and no one appeared. Finally, George turned to me and said, "Well, what did they

say when you invited them?"

"When

I invited them? I thought you did it," I replied. Neither of us had told our

staffs to invite anyone; each assumed that the other had taken care of it. At eight o'clock,

Jeb and Columba Bush did show up. Jeb was the governor of Florida, and he had called

us to see if he could spend the night while he was in town.

In March, I began my education initiatives in earnest. I started out wanting to

replicate some of my most successful Texas projects on a national scale. I made school

visits to highlight innovative educational programs and started planning an early

childhood cognitive development conference to be held in Washington that summer. My

other chief focus was teacher recruitment, positive ways to entice more people to work in

our nation's schools and classrooms. I began by working with two programs, Teach for

America and Troops to Teachers, which encourages members of the military who are

retiring from the service to go into teaching. In less than ten years, it had sent almost four

thousand troops into teaching. George wanted to boost the program's funding from $3

million to $30 million to help more men and women in uniform find a second career in

the classroom. At a Troops to Teachers event at the San Diego Naval Station, I spoke

before almost a thousand sailors and Marines and toured the USS *Shiloh,* a ballistic

missile defense cruiser, as well as the USS *Decatur,* a destroyer, while the air rushed off

the water and the waves broke around their hulls.

And there was another idea that I wanted to initiate, a National Book Festival, to

be held in partnership with the Library of Congress, to bring some of the nation's leading

authors to Washington and, with the help of cable television's C-SPAN, carry their words

to the country at large. I had seen the overwhelming success of the Texas Book Festival,

and I believed that it could have even more meaning on a national scale. The Library of

Congress would be the perfect co-sponsor and a perfect venue to celebrate authors and

promote reading and literacy.

By now, my official duties were in full swing. My chief of staff, the scheduler,

and I held near daily meetings to review the hundreds of requests that came to the White

House. But we were proactive; my policy director, Anne Heiligenstein, looked for

opportunities where I could highlight education issues. My calendar was crowded with

official and courtesy duties, like attending the opening of the Washington, D.C., Cherry

Blossom Festival on April 9 with the Japanese ambassador. And when George met with a

male head of state in the Oval Office, I frequently hosted his wife for coffee. Suzanne

Mubarak, the first lady of Egypt, who was a longtime friend of Bar Bush's, was one of

my first guests; Bar had shown Suzanne the photos of the girls when they were newborns.

Queen Rania of Jordan came to the White House, as did King Juan Carlos and Queen

Sofia of Spain. I needed to master the finer points of protocol that dictated whether I

should address a sovereign as Your Highness or Your Majesty. Queen Elizabeth of

England and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia are both "Your Majesty," but the legion of

crown princes and princesses around the world are called "Your Highness," or sometimes

"Your Royal Highness." It's rather amusing that, more than 225 years after the United

States declared its independence from the monarchy of Great Britain, American

presidents and their spouses pore over protocol briefing books to ensure that they do not

make a misstep in addressing foreign royalty.

Indeed, a coffee at the White House is a highly elaborate affair, involving briefing

books and protocol notes, as well as carefully selected china, coffee blends, and

refreshments. It included not simply me and my guest but ambassadors' wives and staff

members murmuring in the background. Some of the wives who came were so nervous

either about meeting me or about being in the White House that they read their carefully

scripted conversation points off preprinted note cards folded in their hands or perched on

their laps. But often these events turned into highly personal visits, in which the wives of

other heads of state and I could talk about our lives, our families, and the challenges of

balancing public needs with maintaining a private life at home. We were diverse women

thrown together by circumstance, but we found much common ground in the way of

shared experiences.

For Easter, we went to the ranch. It was the first time we had spent the night in

our new home, and George was thrilled to stand in the finished rooms that we had

imagined and planned together for so long. As with any new house, there were windows

without coverings and beds without comforters and sheets, but at last our own home was

complete. We were up for sunrise services at the Canaan Baptist Church down the road,

and the world that morning had the tranquil sense of being at peace. Mother came back

with us to Washington, and three nights later, we went to the Holocaust Memorial

Museum on the eve of the Day of Remembrance for the Holocaust. Joining us were Don

Etra, one of George's best friends from Yale, and his wife, Paula, and Tom and Andi

Bernstein, who had been among our co-owners of the Texas Rangers. George had

appointed Don and Tom to serve on the Holocaust museum board.

The museum is only minutes from the White House, tucked in between the

Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing. Yet behind its

brick and granite walls is a testament to overwhelming evil, evil planned and perpetrated

by some of the most advanced minds in human history. We walked past a cattle car that

had carried Jews and others along rail lines to the death camps; we saw piles of unlaced

shoes from Majdanek, reconstructed barracks from Auschwitz, the implements of the

crematoriums, the crayon drawings of children who were gassed and burned to ash at

Theresienstadt.

The next morning, George, Mother, and I were in the Capitol Rotunda for the

ceremonies to mark the Day of Remembrance. We watched as flags from each American

military unit that had liberated the Nazi death camps were carried in. Mother and I

waited, side by side, trying to remember which flag and which unit was Daddy's. Then

suddenly we saw it, the Timberwolf flag, with its signature wolf, head up, mouth open, as

if in full howl. And we both burst into tears. All those years, we had kept his photographs

tucked away in that box, but they were so small, and this horror was so large.

For that moment, as we stood watching that flag and remembering, Daddy was

with us.

Then George spoke. "When we remember the Holocaust and to whom it

happened," he said, "we must also remember where it happened. It didn't happen in some

remote or unfamiliar place; it happened right in the middle of the Western world. Trains

carrying men, women, and children in cattle cars departed from Paris and Vienna,

Frankfurt and Warsaw. And the orders came not from crude and uneducated men, but

from men who regarded themselves as cultured and well-schooled, modern and even

forward-looking. They had all the outward traits of cultured men--except for conscience.

Their crimes show the world that evil can slip in and blend in, amid the most civilized of

surroundings. In the end, only conscience can stop it, and moral discernment and decency

and tolerance. These can never be assured in any time or in any society. They must

always be taught."

We felt such overwhelming sadness that day, yet we felt safe. On that morning,

we never contemplated the face of other evils that might slip in.

One of the invitations that crossed my desk that spring was for the opening of the

Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition of Jacqueline Kennedy's dresses. I said yes. The

invitation offered the option of bringing guests, so I asked Regan and her daughter, Lara,

and Barbara to join me. We arrived at the museum and were met in the receiving line by

Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue,* as well as the designer Oscar de la Renta and

Caroline Kennedy. It was my first-ever New York designer affair. The last time I had

seen Caroline Kennedy was at the opening of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library

in 1997. I remember that, amid the sea of Carters, Fords, Clintons, and Bushes, she was

standing there alone. So I went over and introduced myself, and we began talking. She

was just a few weeks shy of turning forty then, eight years older than her mother was

when she assumed the title of First Lady of the United States. At thirty-one, Jackie

Kennedy was such a young woman when her husband became president, yet she left a

rich legacy in decorating and conserving the White House. For me, the most moving

story was her last project: the Oval Office. While the president and first lady were on a

pre-Thanksgiving trip, the White House staff had installed her newly chosen curtains and

other furnishings. The trip that Jackie and John F. Kennedy made was to Dallas. Before

she returned to the White House, as a widow, the staff removed the new decor, restoring

the Oval Office to the way President Kennedy had left it, the one thing in the home that

could still be returned to the way it had been.

After the receiving line, we had to ascend the museum's grand marble staircase to

reach the exhibition. Someone had cleverly lined the staircase with violinists and, I

believe, a few trumpeters. Orchestra members stretched the entire way up. But it was a bit

too clever. There was no way to grab on to the handrail. So there I was, holding up my

gown and climbing these stairs, hoping that I wouldn't step on my dress and thinking,

Please don't trip and fall. And later I heard that women in their long gowns did tumble on

the marble stairs. It was instructive to me, though. I never lined the marble White House

stairs with anyone, so that all guests could easily grasp the handrail.

We were guided through the collection by Hamish Bowles, the impeccably

groomed *Vogue* contributor. I gazed at the dark red boucle day dress that Jackie Kennedy

had worn to give the television tour of the White House, which Americans saw only in

black and white, as well as her crepe silk evening gowns and apricot silk dresses. When

we came to her inaugural clothes, Hamish said, "This is what one should wear to

inaugurations, pearl gray. It isn't turquoise blue or something like that."

I loved Jackie Kennedy's clothes because they were the clothes I had grown up

seeing as a young woman. I remember a classic pink coat that I bought at Neiman Marcus

when I was at SMU, which I kept tucked away in paper for years, hoping Barbara or

Jenna might want it when they were grown. But there is something different about seeing

another first lady's clothes on display. I knew my inaugural gown would be joining the

gown collection at the Smithsonian, but there is more to it than that. There is the strange

knowledge that how you look will be critiqued and that what you wear will likely end up

on display. Nancy Reagan told me a few years ago that when the Ronald Reagan

Presidential Library put together a showing of her clothes, it became the most visited

exhibit in the entire library. She laughed when she said it, adding, "You know, those

clothes that I was always criticized for?"

I was like all first ladies in that I wanted to look good. I knew how interested the

public and the press are in what first ladies wear. Like the women before me, I wanted to

look elegant, to appear my best at events here and abroad, and not to glance back later at

White House photos and silently cringe. I really felt for Hillary Clinton, who spent years

having the press write nasty things about her hairstyles. It unnerved me enough that I paid

with our own money for someone to come to the White House and blow-dry my hair

almost every morning, just so I could try to avoid a bad hair day. But while some first

ladies are genuinely interested in fashion, I'm not one who follows each new season's

trends; I have been wearing the same suits, sweaters, and slacks for years. Jackie

Kennedy is always going to be more stylish. She was from a part of the country and a

part of society that cultivated a certain style and manner. East Coast elegance was

exotically enchanting but also out of reach to sweater-set girls in Midland.

The daily hair blow-dries were just one of the monetary costs of living in the

White House. Most Americans may not realize that presidents and their families are

responsible for their personal costs while they reside at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and

that George and I paid for ours out of our own pockets. The presidential room, as it were,

is covered, but not the board. The house we had to live in was spectacular. We had

luxuries that we could not have afforded in our private life, such as an exquisite home

and furnishings, a full staff, a chef, and a fully staffed weekend retreat at Camp David.

Presidents and their families are fortunately not responsible for a White House mortgage

or the White House utility bills, and it is more than fair that they pay for personal items

like every American household.

George and I covered the costs for our own food each month--breakfast, lunch,

and dinner at the White House and at Camp David--and if the girls came home or we had

friends to dinner or guests who stayed overnight, we were billed for their food as well.

We paid for our dry cleaning and outside laundry, and if we hosted a private party, as we

did when George's parents celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary, we paid the

expenses ourselves, including the hourly wages for the waiters and servers and the setup

and cleanup crews, who needed to receive time and a half if the party was held after 5:00

p.m. We did ask the Republican National Committee to pay for the White House

Christmas parties, including the holiday parties for the press, and outside nonprofits

sometimes assumed the costs of other events. The Ford's Theatre Society generously used

its own funds to help cover White House celebrations of Abraham Lincoln's birthday or

the awarding of the Lincoln Prize. Every month, though, we received an itemized bill for

our living and personal expenses at the White House.

But there were some costs that I was not prepared for. I was amazed by the sheer

number of designer clothes that I was expected to buy, like the women before me, to meet

the fashion expectations for a first lady. After our first year in the White House, our

accountant said to George, "It costs a lot to be president," and he was referring mainly to

my clothes. Of course, I recycled most of my wardrobe, wearing the same dress to the

White House correspondents' dinner in the spring and then again to the Congressional

Ball in December, but heavily photographed occasions, like state dinners or the annual

Kennedy Center honors, required new gowns each time.

There were times when the recycling went too far. One Sunday morning, I arrived

at Fox News for an interview with Chris Wallace. Looking around at the photos in the

greenroom, I saw that I had worn the exact same suit to my last interview with Chris.

Quickly, I exchanged tops with my press secretary, so that it would seem as if I had a bit

more wardrobe variety. To look my best abroad, I employed a hairdresser to accompany

me on overseas trips, and if I needed professional makeup for a state event or a television

interview, I paid for that as well. Today, I like to flip through home decorating magazines

while I dry my own hair.

On Friday, April 27, George and I were at our ranch after having spent most of

the day in Austin for the dedication of the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum. The

next day, we would return to Washington for the White House Correspondents'

Association dinner. It was early on Saturday morning when the phone rang. Jenna was on

the line, in tears. She had been cited the night before for ordering drinks in a bar in Austin

and being underage with a fake ID. By the time Jenna called us, nothing we could have

said would have made her feel any worse, but we still gave her a stern talk. Her picture

was splashed across the television and newspapers; she would be part of local news film

footage and the slightly blurry image at the end of a photographer's long-range telephoto

lens. When George had been sworn in, I had asked the press to keep the girls out of the

public eye, much as they had done with Chelsea Clinton. But Jenna had put herself in the

news. We told her that this would be a lesson, and one that she had learned the hard way.

Her friends might do something wrong and not make headlines, but she did not have that

luxury.

Almost immediately a warm note of encouragement arrived for Jenna and Barbara

from Luci Johnson, who shared with them the advice that her own mother, Lady Bird,

gave to her and Lynda: "Don't do anything that you wouldn't want to read about on the

front page of *The New York Times,* because if you do, it will be." Cherie Blair also sent

me a sympathetic note. The year before, her sixteen-year-old son, Euan, had had his own

embarrassing run-in with the law, although enduring the British tabloids had proven to be

a far worse punishment than a formal police caution.

That night in Austin was just dumb, in the way that so many nineteen-year-olds

are dumb. I remember a line from *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency,* a series of novels

by Alexander McCall Smith, in which his main character, Precious Ramotswe, says,

"Twenty-one-year-olds are so stupid. And there are so many of them."

To her credit, Jenna rose to the occasion. She quit going to clubs and other places

in downtown Austin. And for years, I've talked to both Barbara and Jenna about the risks

of alcohol. Their father quit drinking; my father overdrank; and I've warned both of them

about the perils of alcohol, saying, "Nothing good ever happens when you are drunk."

But what bothered me long after the incident was over was the image left behind

in the public mind, that Barbara and Jenna were party girls. We never considered using

publicists to shape their image, as some prominent figures and celebrities do. We wanted

them to live their lives as privately and as normally as possible. I tried to slip away to

Austin to see Jenna's sorority show skits, which were put on by the girls for their moms.

And I went to visit both girls at school during the year, coming in to do what all college

moms do, help them clean their dorm rooms, make a quick run to Bed Bath & Beyond for

a lamp or towels or a laundry bag. Most of the snippets that ended up on the news were

nothing like our daughters. Many were just plain wrong. Otherwise, Jenna would not

have chosen to work with AIDS sufferers in Central America or to teach, and Barbara

would not be devoting herself to public health in Africa. But that is the baggage that

comes with public life; there are no "private" mistakes. I accepted it and moved on, and

they did the same.

In the way that ancient astronomical calendars measured time by the passage of

the seasons, the movement of the moon, the seeding of the soil, the culling of the harvest,

the presidential calendar is governed by summitry. There are the NATO summits, the

Summits of the Americas; the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summits; the G8

meetings; and the United States-European Union summits, all of which rotate locations,

usually abroad. Then there are the visits to call on allies, to build relationships with other

leaders, to engage other corners of the world. We would pass in and out of a country in a

day or even a single afternoon. The flights were invariably overnight, and the expectation

was that we would arrive looking perfectly rested and impeccably groomed. Our luggage

and the bags of our aides made their own convoy; our vehicles traveled with us in the

bellies of cargo planes.

Summer 2001 began with what would become the familiar whirlwind of travel,

five countries in five days in June, first to Spain, where we called on the king and queen,

and where I visited the Prado Museum with Ana Botella de Aznar, the wife of Spain's

prime minister. Afterward, we went to the National Library, where the curators displayed

drawings by Leonardo da Vinci, original editions of the classic novel *Don Quixote*, and

early Spanish maps of Texas. From there, it was a stop in Belgium for the NATO

Summit, and a tour of a market, a church, and a university library, then a NATO spouses'

lunch, an interview for the CBS *Early Show*, then on to a meeting at the Brussels

American School, as well as a visit with Belgium's King Albert II and Queen Paola at the

Laeken Palace. The following morning, we were on our way to Sweden, where George

joined the US-EU Summit while I toured a children's center and then a botanical garden.

Late in the afternoon, we met with His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf and Her Majesty

Queen Silvia, as well as Her Royal Highness Crown Princess Victoria. The Swedish

monarchy is one of the oldest in the world; Sweden has crowned kings for over one

thousand years. We were introduced surrounded by the tapestry-covered walls of the sixhundred-room Royal Palace; I learned that the king and queen had nine other royal

residences scattered around Stockholm. Meanwhile, on the streets, poster-wielding and

face-painted anti-globalization protesters were out in force, condemning international

corporations and international financial institutions, and a few protesting George. The

protests did not die down after we left. Three demonstrators throwing cobblestones and

other objects were shot by Swedish riot police, but the protesters never got close to any of

the continent's leaders, and by the time they had turned violent, we were long gone.

From the gilded chairs and high-ceilinged palaces of European royalty, I flew to

Warsaw, Poland. I met First Lady Jolanta Kwasniewska, and together we toured a

children's hospital. Then, after lunch, I went to the Lauder Kindergarten, opened by the

American cosmetics magnate and philanthropist Ronald Lauder to educate children of the

few Jewish families who had survived the Holocaust and had returned to or somehow

remained in Warsaw. All the children were blond, and Ron Lauder quietly said to me,

"This is why their families escaped. They were the ones who were able to blend in." As I

left, the children gathered and sang "Deep in the Heart of Texas," with a sweet overlay of

Polish accents. My next stop was the Noz.yk Synagogue. The only one in Warsaw to

survive World War II, it stood within the walls of another property, almost hidden.

Unlike the four hundred other synagogues in the city, Noz.yk was left because the Nazis

stabled their horses inside it and piled its floors and corners with feed. After the

synagogue came an orphanage. I met with a group of eighteen-to twenty-year-olds who

were about to leave their dormitory-style rooms and begin life on their own, with no

family to call or come home to. The children were thin and sad, and they barely spoke as

we sat inside the old building and its spartan rooms. I told them about how nervous I had

been when I started my first teaching job, in the hope that they might find some small

comfort in that.

As the afternoon drew to a close, I joined George at a ceremony for the Warsaw

Ghetto Memorial, where some 400,000 Jews were fenced in like cattle behind barbed

wire and then were deported to death camps or finally slaughtered by Nazi guns and

flamethrowers that were shot into basements and sewers until entire blocks became

infernos. At day's end, George delivered an address with the president; then it was a

quick change into black-tie evening clothes for cocktails, a receiving line, and a formal

state dinner.

After those few days, the crush of images was almost too much to absorb, from

glittering fairy-tale palaces to the depths of human despair.

And we still had a meeting with U.S. Embassy staff the next morning, as well as a

wreath-laying ceremony to commemorate the Warsaw Uprising before flying on to

Slovenia. While George had his first face-to-face meeting with Russian president

Vladimir Putin and invited him to our ranch, I was whisked off for lunch at the Grand

Hotel Toplice, a favorite of the staff of Yugoslavia's old dictator, Marshal Tito, and then

a boat ride over to a small island that houses the Assumption of Mary Pilgrimage Church,

overlooking Bled's deep, blue lake, which had been carved out by the last of the thick Ice

Age glaciers as they retreated from the lower reaches of Europe. I walked up the famous

ninety-nine steps rising from the base of the island. Tradition is that, on their wedding

day, grooms carry their brides up the steps to the church for the ceremony. When I

arrived, there was a wedding in progress, and the bride rushed forward to embrace me,

saying this was the best day of her life. I watched costumed folk-life dancers and rang the

bell of wishes. Three more brides and grooms were waiting for us as we entered the

church. As we left, people lined the sides of the road to wave. In central Europe, where

the nations lived under decades of harsh Soviet domination during the Cold War, many of

the citizens are deeply pro-American. Like that bride, they always welcomed me with

open arms.

Those five days in Europe captured the routine of nearly all our travels, packed

days with nations anxious to display their particular beauties and treasures, while others

shared their struggles to face the dark episodes of their past.

Back at the White House, by late June, the Rose Garden was in full bloom.

Designed like an eighteenth-century garden, it has neatly arrayed beds and borders.

Tulips, daffodils, and flowering trees bloom in the spring, and by summer, the fragrance

of roses fills the air. I watched the lines of tourists gather outside in the mornings in the

rising heat to be led on tours of the public rooms, and I began to look for ways to

showcase distinctive American arts inside the White House. On June 29, George and I

hosted a White House celebration for Black Music Month, featuring Debbie Allen as the

master of ceremonies and performances by the Four Tops and James Brown. Lionel

Hampton, who had sent those beautiful rose bouquets to celebrate Barbara's and Jenna's

births, bravely came, even though strokes and illness had shrunk him down to little more

than skin.

For July 4, I at last successfully surprised George for his birthday. We had spent

the day in Pennsylvania with Governor Tom and Michele Ridge. When the four of us

returned to the White House, Gary Walters, the head usher, told George there was a

sample of his new rug for the Oval Office in the State Dining Room and asked would he

like to see it? George said yes, and as we stepped in, the word "Surprise" was being

shouted by many of our closest friends. I did the same party every year after that, always

on July 4, with fried chicken, deviled eggs, corn bread, all classic picnic and barbecue

staples.

The White House pastry chef, Roland Mesnier, made George a cake in the shape

of a baseball. It poured rain during dinner but cleared just in time for us to watch the

Independence Day fireworks light up the Mall.

In mid-July, we were in Air Force One, high aloft the Atlantic, headed for our

first visit to England. Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip had invited us for a luncheon at

Buckingham Palace, on perfectly pressed linens and china emblazoned with the royal

coat of arms. Then we helicoptered over to meet Tony and Cherie Blair at Chequers, the

sixteenth-century summer home of England's prime ministers.

We had hosted the Blairs at Camp David; now they wanted to show us the same

comfort in return. Chequers sits on grounds that have been recorded in history since

Roman times; the name of the original estate was inscribed in the Domesday Book of

1086. Its name likely comes from a twelfth-century British landholder who was an

official of the King's Exchequer. Its house is a medium-size redbrick Tudor mansion

completed in 1565, fifty-five years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock. Inside,

Cherie showed me a ring that belonged to the first Queen Elizabeth and a table used by

the French emperor Napoleon during his exile.

Despite its formal pedigree, our evening at Chequers was very casual. The Blairs'

children were there, along with one of their school friends, and Barbara had joined us

with one of her school friends. The kids peppered everyone with questions, and it was a

fast-moving conversation, covering everything from the merits of missile defense-George being the primary defender and Cherie the skeptic--to capital punishment. On that

issue, the American president and the British prime minister's wife, a human rights

lawyer, were on vastly different planes. But the debate was cordial. Cherie says no one,

left or right, can claim that George doesn't have a very good sense of humor.

When it was over and we all began making our way upstairs, I overheard the

Blairs' oldest son, Euan, saying to Cherie, "Give the man a break, Mother."

From England, our next stop was Italy, for George to attend the G8 Summit, a

meeting of the eight leading industrialized countries, where we also had an audience with

the Pope in his summer residence, Castel Gandolfo, and then on to Pristina, Kosovo,

where Italian peacekeepers advised our staff not to walk on the grass adjacent to the

airport runway because not all the land mines had been removed. Kosovo was, at that

moment in July, the global hot spot where some seven thousand U.S. troops had been

deployed two years before as part of a NATO force that had arrived after prolonged and

bloody fighting between the Kosovo Liberation Army and Serbia. It was the last of the

Balkan crises. Because we were entering what was considered a combat zone, the Secret

Service insisted that we wear flak jackets for the ride on Marine One to the U.S. base

named Camp Bondsteel. I dedicated an education center that was being named for me

and toured the base before George addressed the troops, and we had lunch in the base's

mess. In Kosovo, half the population being guarded by our soldiers was under the age of

twenty-five. At that moment, aside from an incident in the spring when China had

detained and interrogated the twenty-four-person crew from a Navy surveillance plane,

the Balkans claimed the lion's share of international attention. So on that bright summer

day, we had helicoptered into what everyone assumed were the front lines of the world's

most prominent war.

By the end of the summer, I was finally hitting my stride in the White House. I

had hosted my long-planned conference at Georgetown University on early childhood

cognitive development; my pet project, the National Book Festival, was scheduled to

debut on Saturday, September 8; and we had gotten away to our ranch in August, with

George bringing his senior staff and all the White House work along. Whenever George

traveled, even to Camp David, the chief of staff or the chief's deputy almost always came.

Now, in addition to the barn and the tractor shed and the green clapboard house, the U.S.

government had put a prefab house on our ranchlands for the military aides, the White

House doctor, and other members of the staff who accompany the president. National

Security Advisor Condi Rice frequently joined us; she had been coming to the ranch

since before the election, and we had even named one of our hills Balkan Hill in her

honor. On a hike, she was discussing the finer points of Balkan policy with George, never

getting winded while she climbed the steep rise. Now her preferred place to stay was the

green clapboard house.

At the ranch, there were briefings each morning, teleconferences, and piles of

papers. Being President of the United States does not include an allowance for vacation

days. George never took a full day off. There was little difference between being in

Washington and being in Crawford, except that I could hike the trails we were building

and could step out the door into the fresh air without trailing down hallways and having a

phalanx of Secret Service agents filing behind. In the White House, I could walk each

morning along the corridors from the residence to my offices in the East Wing. Most of

the events we hosted and the entertaining we did, even simple coffees, were inside the

White House itself, and unless I took Barney and Spot for a walk, it was possible to

spend several days without ever venturing outside. At our ranch, from first light, the

outside found us.

As September 2001 opened, I was reviewing my upcoming briefing before the

Senate Education Committee on the findings of the early childhood cognitive

development conference, readying events for the book festival, preparing for the official

inaugural gown presentation at the Smithsonian, and overseeing plans for our first state

dinner, in honor of Mexico's president, Vicente Fox. State dinner guests are selected by

the president, the State Department, and the National Security Council. We had a

particular interest in inviting Mexico because of trade and border issues. George wanted

to establish a strong working relationship with our closest neighbor to the south.

I was not nervous before my own wedding--there were no jitters or cold palms

then--but I was anxious now. A state dinner is far more intricate, an elaborate display of

hundreds of moving parts, from guest lists to menus, which require an advance tasting, to

table seatings, arrival protocols, and choices of linens, flowers, china, and silver, even the

champagnes and wines. And traditionally all of this falls under the purview of the White

House Social Office, working with the Office of the First Lady. If the four-hour evening

is flawless, it is only because of the hundreds of hours that have been invested

beforehand. No detail is too small. My dress of red lace over hot pink silk had been

custom-made by Arnold Scaasi, bright colors in honor of the bright tones of Mexico.

Cathy Fenton, the social secretary, who had worked for both Nancy Reagan and Barbara

Bush, and Nancy Clarke, the longtime White House florist, created tablescapes of white

hydrangeas, lilies, and roses interspersed with limes as another nod to Mexico. The

arrival ceremony in the morning included a full twenty-one-gun salute and a review of

the troops. Afterward, we escorted the Foxes to the balcony off the Blue Room, and

surrounded by overflowing pots of red geraniums, we watched a fireworks display light

up the sky above the Washington Monument.

The next day, Marta Fox and I flew to Chicago to tour an exhibition surveying

two hundred years of Latino art in the United States at the city's Terra Museum of

American Art. Many of the contemporary Latin American artists whose work was

featured joined us, and it was a wonderful day of art and culture and beauty. The Foxes

departed the next morning, as I began final preparations for the National Book Festival,

which was set to open that weekend.

On Friday night, we held a gala for the festival at the Library of Congress, before

the official day of author events. Dr. James Billington, the Librarian of Congress,

introduced me. As the back of the stage opened, I walked out in a blue Arnold Scaasi

dress, with sheer chiffon and a short underskirt. The crowd gasped, and I felt as if this

was my official debut as first lady. Not quite nine months after George took office, I was

now doing what I loved, finding my place in the world of Washington and beyond.

Goodness in the Land of the Living

With George at the Pentagon, October 11, 2001.

(White House photo)

Tuesday morning, September 11, was sunny and warm, the sky a brilliant

cerulean blue. The day before, I had hosted a lunch for Janette Howard, wife of the

Australian prime minister, while George met with her husband, John. My friends who

had come for the National Book Festival had all flown home, and even George was gone,

in Florida for a school visit. George H. W. Bush and Bar had spent the night, but they had

already left at 7:00 a.m. to catch an early flight. And I had what I considered a big day

planned. I was set to arrive at the Capitol at 9:15 to brief the Senate Education

Committee, chaired by Edward M. Kennedy, on the findings of the early childhood

development conference that I'd held in July. In the afternoon, we were hosting the entire

Congress and their families for the annual Congressional Picnic. The South Lawn of the

White House was already covered with picnic tables awaiting their fluttering cloths, and

Tom Perini from Buffalo Gap, Texas, was setting up his chuckwagons. Our entertainment

would be old-fashioned square dancing and Texas swing music by Ray Benson and his

classic band, Asleep at the Wheel.

I finished dressing in silence, going over my statement again in my mind. I was

very nervous about appearing before a Senate committee and having news cameras

trained on me. Had the TV been turned on, I might have heard the first fleeting report of a

plane hitting the North Tower of the World Trade Center at the tip of Manhattan as I

walked out the door to the elevator. Instead, it was the head of my Secret Service detail,

Ron Sprinkle, who leaned over and whispered the news in my ear as I entered the car a

few minutes after 9:00 a.m. for the ride to the Russell Senate Office Building, adjacent to

the Capitol. Andi Ball, now my chief of staff at the White House; Domestic Policy

Advisor Margaret Spellings; and I speculated about what could have happened: a small

plane, a Cessna perhaps, running into one of those massive towers on this perfect

September morning. We wondered too if Hillary Clinton might decide not to attend the

committee briefing, since the World Trade Center was in New York. We were driving up

Pennsylvania Avenue when word came that the South Tower had been hit. The car fell

silent; we sat in mute disbelief. One plane might be a strange accident; two planes were

clearly an attack. I thought about George and wondered if the Secret Service had already

hustled him to the motorcade and begun the race to Air Force One to return home. Two

minutes later, at 9:16 a.m., we pulled up at the entrance to the Russell Building. In the

time it had taken to drive the less than two miles between the White House and the

Capitol, the world as I knew it had irrevocably changed.

Senator Kennedy was waiting to greet me, according to plan. We both knew when

we met that the towers had been hit and, without a word being spoken, knew that there

would be no briefing that morning. Together, we walked the short distance to his office.

He began by presenting me with a limited-edition print; it was a vase of bright daffodils,

a copy of a painting he had created for his wife, Victoria, and given to her on their

wedding day. The print was inscribed to me and dated September 11, 2001.

An old television was turned on in a corner of the room, and I glanced over to see

the plumes of smoke billowing from the Twin Towers. Senator Kennedy kept his eyes

averted from the screen. Instead he led me on a tour of his office, pointing out various

pictures, furniture, pieces of memorabilia, even a framed note that his brother Jack had

sent to their mother when he was a child, in which he wrote, "Teddy is getting fat." The

senator, who would outlive all his brothers by more than forty years, laughed at the note

as he showed it to me, still finding it amusing.

All the while, I kept glancing over at the glowing television screen. My skin was

starting to crawl, I wanted to leave, to find out what was going on, to process what I was

seeing, but I felt trapped in an endless cycle of pleasantries. It did not occur to me to say,

"Senator Kennedy, what about the towers?" I simply followed his lead, and he may have

feared that if we actually began to contemplate what had happened in New York, I might

dissolve into tears.

Senator Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, the ranking Republican on the committee

and one of our very good friends in the Senate--Judd had played Al Gore for George

during mock debates at the ranch the previous fall--was also designated to escort me to

the committee room, and he arrived just as I was completing the tour. Senator Kennedy

invited us to sit on the couches, and he continued chatting about anything other than the

horrific images unfolding on the tiny screen across the room. I looked around his

shoulder but could see very little, and I was still trying to pay attention to him and the

thread of his conversation. It seemed completely unreal, sitting in this elegant, sunlit

office as an immense tragedy unfolded. We sat as human beings driven by smoke, flame,

and searing heat jumped from the tops of the Twin Towers to end their lives and as

firemen in full gear began the climb up the towers' stairs.

I have often wondered if the small talk that morning was Ted Kennedy's defense

mechanism, if after so much tragedy--the combat death of his oldest brother in World

War II, the assassinations of his brothers Jack and Robert, and the deaths of nephews,

including John Jr., whose body he identified when it was pulled from the cold, dark

waters off Martha's Vineyard--if after all of those things, he simply could not look upon

another grievous tragedy.

At about 9:45, after George had made a brief statement to the nation, which we

watched, clustered around a small television that was perched on the receptionist's desk,

Ted Kennedy, Judd Gregg, and I walked out to tell reporters that my briefing had been

postponed. I said, "You heard from the president this morning, and Senator Kennedy and

Senator Gregg and I both join his statement in saying that our hearts and our prayers go

out to the victims of this act of terrorism, and that our support goes to the rescue workers.

And all of our prayers are with everyone there right now." As I turned to exit, Laurence

McQuillan of *USA Today* asked a question. "Mrs. Bush, you know, children are kind of

struck by all this. Is there a message you could tell to the nation's--" I didn't even wait for

him to finish but began, "Well, parents need to reassure their children everywhere in our

country that they're safe."

As we walked out of the briefing room, the cell phone of my advance man, John

Meyers, rang. A friend told him that CNN was reporting that an airplane had crashed into

the Pentagon. Within minutes, the order would be given to evacuate the White House and

the Capitol.

I walked back to Senator Kennedy's office and then began moving quickly toward

the stairs, to reach my car to return to the White House. Suddenly, the lead Secret Service

agent turned to me and my staff and said that we needed to head to the basement

immediately. We took off at a run; Judd Gregg suggested his private office, which was in

the lower level and was an interior room. The Secret Service then told John that they

were waiting for an Emergency Response Team to reach the Capitol. The team would

take me, but my staff would be left behind. Overhearing the conversation, I turned back

and said, "No, everyone is coming." We entered Judd's office, where I tried to call

Barbara and Jenna, and Judd tried to call his daughter, who was in New York. Then we

sat and talked quietly about our families and our worries for them, and the overwhelming

shock we both felt.

Sometime after 10:00 a.m., when the entire Capitol was being emptied, when

White House staffers had fled barefoot and sobbing through the heavy iron gates with

Secret Service agents shouting at them to "Run, run!" my agents collected me. They now

included an additional Secret Service detail and an Emergency Response Team, dressed

in black tactical clothing like a SWAT force and moving with guns drawn. As we raced

through the dim hallways of the Russell Building, past panicked staffers emptying from

their offices, the ERT team shouted *"GET BACK"* and covered my every move with their

guns. We reached the underground entrance; the doors on the motorcade slammed shut,

and we sped off. The Secret Service had decided to take me temporarily to their

headquarters, located in a nondescript federal office building a few blocks from the White

House. Following the Oklahoma City bombing, their offices had been reinforced to

survive a large-scale blast. Outside our convoy windows, the city streets were clogged

with people evacuating their workplaces and trying to reach their own homes.

By the time I had reached my motorcade, Flight 93 had crashed in a Pennsylvania

field and the west side of the Pentagon had begun to collapse. Judd Gregg walked alone

to the underground Senate parking garage and retrieved his car, the last one left there. He

pulled out of the garage and headed home, across the Fourteenth Street Bridge and past

the Pentagon, thick with smoke and flame.

In the intervening years, Judd and I, and many others, were left to contemplate

what if Flight 93 had not been forced down by its passengers into an empty field; what if,

shortly after 10:00 a.m., it had reached the Capitol Dome?

We arrived at the Secret Service building via an underground entrance and were

escorted first to the director's office and then belowground to a windowless conference

room with blank walls and a mustard yellow table. A large display screen with a constant

TV feed took up most of one wall. Walking through the hallways, I saw a sign

emblazoned with the emergency number 9-1-1. Had the terrorists thought about our

iconic number when they picked this date and planned an emergency so overwhelming?

For a while, I sat in a small area off the conference room, silently watching the images on

television. I watched the replay as the South Tower of the World Trade Center roared

with sound and then collapsed into a silent gray plume, offering my personal prayer to

God to receive the victims with open arms. The North Tower had given way, live in front

of my eyes, sending some 1,500 souls and 110 stories of gypsum and concrete buckling

to the ground.

So much happened during those terrible hours at the tip of Manhattan. That

morning, as the people who worked in the towers descended, water from the sprinkler

system was racing down the darkened stairwells. With their feet soaked, for some the

greatest fear was that when they reached the bottom, the rushing water would be too high

and they would be drowned. A few walked to safety under a canopy of skylights covered

with the bodies of those who had jumped. Over two hundred people jumped to escape the

heat, smoke, and flames. I was told that Father Mychal Judge, the chaplain for the New

York City Fire Department, who had come to offer aid, comfort, and last rites, was killed

that morning by the body of someone who had, in desperation, hurled himself from the

upper floors of one of those towers.

The early expectation was for horrific numbers of deaths. Manhattan emergency

rooms and hospitals as far away as Dallas were placed on Code Red, expecting to receive

airlifted survivors. Some fifty thousand people worked inside the towers; on a beautiful

day, as many as eighty thousand tourists would visit an observation deck on the South

Tower's 107th floor, where the vistas stretched for fifty miles. Had those hijacked planes

struck the towers thirty or forty or fifty minutes later, the final toll might well have been

in the tens of thousands.

Inside Secret Service headquarters, I asked my staff to call their families, and I

called the girls, who had been whisked away by Secret Service agents to secure locations.

In Austin, Jenna had been awakened by an agent pounding on her dorm door. In her room

at Yale, Barbara had heard another student sobbing uncontrollably a few doors down.

Then I called my mother, because I wanted her to know that I was safe and I wanted so

much to hear the sound of her voice. And I tried to reach George, but my calls could not

get through; John Meyers, my advance man, promised to keep trying. I did know from

the Secret Service that George had taken off from Florida, safe on board Air Force One. I

knew my daughters and my mother were safe. But beyond that, everything was chaos. I

was told that Barbara Olson, wife of Solicitor General Ted Olson, had been aboard the

plane that hit the Pentagon. At one point, we also received word that Camp David had

been attacked and hit. I began thinking of all the people who would have been there, like

Bob Williams, the chaplain. Another report had a plane crashing into our ranch in

Crawford. It got so that we were living in five-minute increments, wondering if a new

plane would emerge from the sky and hit a target. All of us in that basement conference

room and many more in the Secret Service building were relying on rumors and on

whatever news came from the announcers on television. When there were reports of more

errant planes or other targets, it was almost impossible not to believe them.

George had tried to call me from Air Force One. It is stunning now to think that

our "state-of-the-art" communications would not allow him to complete a phone call to

Secret Service headquarters, or me to reach him on Air Force One. On my second call

from the secure line, our third attempt, I was finally able to contact the plane, a little

before twelve noon. I was grateful just to hear his voice, to know that he was all right,

and to tell him the girls were fine. From the way he spoke, I could hear how starkly his

presidency had been transformed.

We remained in that drab conference room for hours, eventually turning off the

repetitive horror of the images on the television. Inside, I felt a grief, a loss, a mourning

like I had never known.

A few blocks away, in the Chrysler offices near Pennsylvania Avenue, a group of

White House senior staff began to gather. After the evacuation, some of those who were

new to Washington had been wandering, dazed and shaken, in nearby Lafayette Park. By

midafternoon, seventy staff members had congregated inside this office building,

attempting to resume work, while Secret Service agents stood in the lobby and forbade

anyone without a White House pass from entering. Key presidential and national security

staff and Vice President Cheney were still sealed away in the small underground

emergency center deep below the White House.

As the skies and streets grew silent, there was a debate over what to do with

George and what to do with me. The Secret Service detail told me to be prepared to leave

Washington for several days at least. My assistant, Sarah Moss, was sent into the White

House to gather some of my clothes. John Meyers accompanied her to retrieve Spot,

Barney, and Kitty.

Then we got word that the president was returning to Washington. I would be

staying as well. Late in the afternoon, I spoke to George again. At 6:30 we got in a Secret

Service caravan to drive to the White House. I gazed out the window; the city had taken

on the cast of an abandoned movie set: the sun was shining, but the streets were deserted.

We could not see a person on the sidewalk or any vehicles driving on the street. There

was no sound at all except for the roll of our wheels over the ground.

We drove at full throttle through the gate, and the agents hopped out. Heavily

armed men in black swarmed over the grounds. Before I got out, one of my agents, Dave

Saunders, who had been driving, turned around and said, "Mrs. Bush, I'm so sorry. I'm so

sorry." He said it with the greatest of concern and a hint of emotion in his voice. He knew

what this day meant for us.

I was hustled inside and downstairs through a pair of big steel doors that closed

behind me with a loud hiss, forming an airtight seal. I was now in one of the unfinished

subterranean hallways underneath the White House, heading for the PEOC, the

Presidential Emergency Operations Center, built for President Franklin Roosevelt during

World War II. We walked along old tile floors with pipes hanging from the ceiling and

all kinds of mechanical equipment. The PEOC is designed to be a command center

during emergencies, with televisions, phones, and communications facilities.

I was ushered into the conference room adjacent to the PEOC's nerve center. It's a

small room with a large table. National Security Advisor Condi Rice, Counselor to the

President Karen Hughes, Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Bolten, and Dick and Lynne Cheney

were already there, where they had been since the morning. Lynne, whose agents had

brought her to the White House just after the first attack, came over and hugged me. Then

she said quietly into my ear, "The plane that hit the Pentagon circled the White House

first."

I felt a shiver vibrate down my spine. Unlike the major monuments and even the

leading government buildings in Washington, the White House sits low to the ground. It

is a three-story building, tucked away in a downward slope toward the Potomac. When

the White House was first built, visitors complained about the putrid scent rising from the

river and the swampy grounds nearby. From the air, the White House is hard to see and

hard to reach. A plane could circle it and find no plausible approach. And that is what

Lynne Cheney told me had happened that morning, a little past 9:30, before Flight 77

crossed the river and thundered into the Pentagon.

At 7:10 that night, George strode into the PEOC. Early that afternoon, he had

conducted a secure videoconference from Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska with the

CIA and FBI directors, as well as the military Joint Chiefs of Staff and the vice president

and his national security staff, giving instructions and getting briefings on the latest

information. Over the objections of the Secret Service, he had insisted upon returning

home. We hugged and talked with the Cheneys a bit. Then the Secret Service detail

suggested that we spend the night there, belowground. They showed us the bed, a foldout

that looked like it had been installed when FDR was president. George and I stared at it,

and we both said no, George adding, "We're not going to sleep down here. We're going to

go upstairs and you can get us if something happens." He said, "I've got to get sleep, in

our own bed." George was preparing to speak to the nation from the Oval Office, to

reassure everyone and to show that the president was safely back in Washington, ready to

respond.

By 7:30 we were on our way up to the residence. I have no memory of having

eaten dinner--George may have eaten on the plane. He tried to call the girls as soon as we

were upstairs but couldn't reach them. Barbara called back close to 8:00 p.m., and then

George left to make remarks to the nation.

We did finally climb into our own bed that night, exhausted and emotionally

drained. Outside the doors of the residence, the Secret Service detail stood in their usual

posts. I fell asleep, but it was a light, fitful rest, and I could feel George staring into the

darkness beside me. Then I heard a man screaming as he ran, "Mr. President, Mr.

President, you've got to get up. The White House is under attack."

We jumped up, and I grabbed a robe and stuck my feet into my slippers, but I

didn't stop to put in my contacts. George grabbed Barney; I grabbed Kitty. With Spot

trailing behind, we started walking down to the PEOC. George had wanted to take the

elevator, but the agents didn't think it was safe, so we had to descend flight after flight of

stairs, to the state floor, then the ground floor, and below, while I held George's hand

because I couldn't see anything. My heart was pounding, and all I could do was count

stairwell landings, trying to count off in my mind how many more floors we had to go.

When we reached the PEOC, I saw the outline of a military sergeant unfolding the

ancient hideaway bed and putting on some sheets.

At that moment, another agent ran up to us and said, "Mr. President, it's one of

our own." The plane was ours.

For months afterward at night, in bed, we'd hear the military jets thundering

overhead, traveling so fast that the ground below quivered and shook. They would make

one pass and then, three or five minutes later, make another low-flying loop. I would fall

asleep to the roar of the fighters in the skies, hearing in my mind those words, "one of our

own." There was a quiet security in that, in knowing that we slept beneath the watchful

cover of our own.

Waking the next morning, I had the sensation of knowing before my eyes opened

that something terrible had happened, something beyond comprehension, and I wondered

for a brief instant if it had all been a dream. Then I saw George, and I knew, knew that

yesterday would be with us, each day, for all of our days to come.

I put on a simple black shirt and gray slacks and went down to meet my staff.

With the exception of Andi Ball and a few others, who were in their fifties, most were

twenty-two or twenty-three years old. For many, it was their first adult job. Nearly all had

been told yesterday to run for their lives and had literally kicked off their high heels and

fled from the East Wing out the asphalt path toward Pennsylvania Avenue. Now they

were being asked to come back to work in a building that everyone considered a target

and for a presidency and a country that would be at war. That morning, they passed piles

of strollers scattered across the lawn, left behind by tourists who had grabbed their

children and fled the White House grounds.

In the days that followed, plans were made to clear the street-side offices of the

Eisenhower Executive Office Building, next to the White House, where much of the

presidential and vice presidential staff worked. The building sits against a narrow

sidewalk along a main cross street, and there were fears of a car or truck bomb pulling

alongside and detonating. Pennsylvania Avenue in front of the White House had been

closed since the Clinton administration. Huge concrete barriers had been erected to keep

traffic from moving past the president's home.

I wanted to start by reassuring my staff. The night before, I had asked Kathleene

Card, a Methodist minister who is married to Andy Card, George's chief of staff, to come

in to speak. She tried to quiet their fears. But it was difficult. It was difficult to awaken in

this new world. We were all still moving on adrenaline, but with an overlay of anxiety.

Would today bring something worse?

After the latest security briefings, George left the White House for the Pentagon

to inspect the damage. I traveled north through Washington to Walter Reed Army

Medical Center, where many of the injured from the Pentagon were being treated. I

visited with the patients and spoke to the doctors and nurses. Those in the military

understood that this was only the first wave. Walter Reed would no longer just be a place

for veterans, or for active-duty troops to recover from severe training injuries, or for the

few casualties from Kosovo. It would be transformed into the closest thing to a combat

hospital on U.S. soil, ministering to the brutally injured from the coming war. And they

knew that we were at war. George knew it too, had known it instantly, but for me, the

realization was more gradual and the ramifications of just what war meant more elusive.

Even when we knew that it was Osama bin Laden from the remote reaches of

Afghanistan who was behind 9-11, I was still focused on the day-to-day needs of people

here at home. How could I help them?

That afternoon, White House staffers lined up in the Indian Treaty Room in the

Eisenhower Executive Office Building to give blood. Already, overseas, American

embassies were choked with flowers. By week's end, millions of people had paused for

moments of silence; over 100,000 came to stand in remembrance in Ottawa, on Canada's

Parliament Hill. Truck drivers stopped and blew their horns in unison all over Poland. In

Berlin, 200,000 Germans marched in support of the United States. Israel, Ireland, South

Korea, and many other countries held national days of mourning. In Great Britain, at

Buckingham Palace, the queen's band played our national anthem during its changing of

the guard, while in Paris, the newspaper *Le Monde* headlined we are all americans.

The next morning, September 13, I had been asked to appear on all the major

morning television shows. What I could think to offer were words of comfort, both to

parents for their children and for the nation at large. I had already written two letters, one

for middle and high school students and one for kids still in elementary school, about the

tragedy. To the youngest children, I wrote, "When sad or frightening things happen, all of

us have an opportunity to become better people by thinking about others. . . . Be kind to

each other, take care of each other, and show your love for each other." And that is what I

saw, in the footage showing the faces of rescue workers at the World Trade Center and

the Pentagon, in the eyes of the burned and injured Pentagon soldiers at Walter Reed and

Washington Hospital Center, in the people who brought food to grieving neighbors and

those who simply sat and grieved with them. I could feel us joined together as a nation.

Some of the worst victims of the Pentagon attack had been brought to Washington

Hospital Center, which has a state-of-the-art burn unit. On Thursday afternoon, George

and I went to visit them. I was the first to enter the room of Lieutenant Colonel Brian

Birdwell, who had suffered severe burns on his hands and his back. He was covered in

white gauze. His wife was at his side, where she had been since he was brought to the

hospital. I spoke with both of them, hugged her, and then said that "someone else" was

waiting to see them. George walked into the room. He asked Lieutenant Colonel Birdwell

how he was doing and told the Birdwells that he was very proud of them both. "You are

my heroes," he said, and then George raised his hand to salute the injured soldier on the

bed. For almost half a minute, Lieutenant Colonel Birdwell worked to move his heavily

bandaged hand to his head to return the salute. George would not break his salute until

after the soldier was finished with his own. In the military, there is no higher sign of

respect than for an injured officer to be saluted first by his commander. Then George

hugged Mrs. Birdwell.

At the World Trade Center, we still didn't know exactly how many were dead-initial reports had been in the tens of thousands--or if anyone else might be found alive.

George had chosen Friday as a national day of prayer and remembrance for the

victims of the 9-11 attacks, and we had scheduled a memorial service at Washington's

National Cathedral, where less than nine months before George and I had gone for the

wonderful celebratory prayer service on the day after his inauguration. There would be

private family memorials in communities across the Northeast and in scattered spots

around the rest of the country. But this was a time for all of us to mourn as a nation. I had

selected a variety of speakers, Reverend Billy Graham to preach, Rabbi Joshua Haberman

to read from the Book of Lamentations, and Imam Muzammil Siddiqi to offer verses

from the Koran. Even Reverend Graham said he could not, to his own satisfaction,

answer the question of why God would allow such tragedy and suffering. He added that

he just had to accept that God "is a God of love and mercy and compassion in the midst

of suffering." When George spoke, he said, "We are here in the middle hour of our grief."

He recalled those who died, having begun "their day at a desk or in an airport, busy with

life." And he remembered the rescuers, "the ones whom death found running up the stairs

and into the fires to help others." After the service, George flew north to visit the remains

of the Twin Towers. When he returned, he told me of the incredible heart of the rescue

workers and of the posters and homemade signs plastered across posts and buildings,

made by people searching for missing family and friends in that week of hope. Those

were the images we reflected on that night, people holding out every last shred of faith

that the ones they loved might have been spared from this tragedy. Because we knew by

then that it was not to be. The bodies of some had been consumed by an ocean of fire and

ash, and their resting places were the wind, the river, and building niches across

Manhattan.

We spent that Friday night and Saturday cloistered away at Camp David with key

cabinet members and the national security team. George was convening a council of war.

On Saturday evening, after a day of intense meetings, Condi Rice, the daughter of a

Presbyterian minister, took a seat at the Camp David piano and began to play hymns. As

she played, Attorney General John Ashcroft encouraged us all to join him and sing. With

intelligence being analyzed and plans under way, on Sunday, we returned somberly to

Washington.

For over a month, I had planned a small dinner at the White House that Sunday to

celebrate the wedding anniversary of Debra and Alan Dunn, friends of ours from

Gampy's 1988 presidential run. George had read at their wedding ten years before. I

decided to keep the evening. I knew that George was consumed, almost every waking

hour, with responding to the attacks, and for an hour or two, I wanted to change the

subject, to give him a chance to briefly refocus and be surrounded by friends. There were

seven couples, and we all chatted, but our guests had driven through largely deserted

streets to a White House that was heavily secured and fortified. It was even slightly

disconcerting for some of them to be within our walls. The threat was too new and too

raw. But we lived with that low-level anxiety all the time, and would do so for years to

come. It was almost 9:00 p.m. when George walked onto the South Lawn with the last of

our guests to take Spot out. Above, a plane roared. George and everyone else looked up,

and George asked, "Is that supposed to be there?" That is the question we asked about

every plane, every noise. As the engine rush grew fainter, George lowered his gaze and

said quietly, "I'm fighting an enemy that I can't see."

At noontime the next day, Monday, I flew to Shanksville, Pennsylvania, for a

memorial for the victims of Flight 93, which had been bravely forced down by some of

its passengers before it reached Washington, D.C. Whenever I visited Shanksville or later

Manhattan, or almost anywhere in the Northeast, people would hand me prayer or

memorial cards that they had made for their loved ones. Some families held out bracelets

that they had engraved with the names of those they had lost. These items were given

with such reverence to me and also to George, and we were careful to collect each one. I

kept one card with the photo of a twenty-five-year-old, raven-haired girl, on my mirror.

Suzanne was her name; her mother had handed it to me along a rope line, where people

gathered so that we might shake their hands or say a quick word. I never knew Suzanne's

last name; I only knew that she had died in one of the towers. I kept her photo tucked in

my mirror frame at the White House until January 20, 2009. Every day I looked at her

beautiful, young face. And in the mornings after 9-11, I longed to hold my own daughters

in my arms.

The leaves were already turning in the rural Pennsylvania southwest when

Governor Tom Ridge and I drove to the memorial service at the crash site. We stood

alongside the field where the plane had plummeted to the ground; the trees at the edge of

the woods were blackened from the fireball that had enveloped this small spot of earth. It

was windy, and we stood under a tent while the families lit candles in honor of their

loved ones. The flames flickered as the air swirled by. It was not a place of orderly white

crosses and Stars of David, like the green fields above the beaches of Normandy in

France. It was a crater in the ground, a mark that time and weather would erode until

perhaps the land would lie almost flat again. This would always be the last resting spot

for their loved ones.

When it was my turn to speak, I said, "America is learning the names, but you

know the people. And you are the ones they thought of in the last moments of life. You

are the ones they called, and prayed to see again. You are the ones they loved. A poet

wrote, 'Love knows not its own depths until the hour of parting.' The loved ones we

remember today knew--even in those horrible moments--that they were not truly alone,

because your love was with them."

As we left Shanksville, my staff and I had our arms filled with pages of notes and

reflections from children whose school building had been within earshot of the crash site,

who had felt the earth shudder and who had heard the ground and woods convulse in

flames.

For the one-week anniversary of 9-11, I flew to Chicago to tape Oprah Winfrey's

talk show. Then, on September 20, as the initial estimates of the dead at the World Trade

Center passed six thousand, George prepared to address a joint session of Congress, the

nation, and the world. British prime minister Tony Blair flew in from London to visit the

World Trade Center site and then came to Washington to stand alongside us. We had a

private dinner at the White House and drove over to the Capitol. The sergeants at arms

for the House and the Senate met us at the door, and I was escorted to a small waiting

room off the gallery. But unlike at the State of the Union, now I was not alone; Tony

Blair was waiting with me. Inside the gallery, we were joined by Tom Ridge, as well as

New York mayor Rudy Giuliani and Governor George Pataki. We had invited a group of

hero guests, representatives of the New York fire and police departments and the Port

Authority, as well as the U.S. Army and Navy, and Lisa Beamer, the pregnant widow of

Todd Beamer, one of the passengers on board Flight 93. Vice President Cheney was

absent from his customary spot behind the podium and was spending the night in a secure

location because of fears of a mass attack on the Capitol. I listened as my husband gave

the Taliban rulers of Afghanistan the first of a series of ultimatums, including surrender

Osama bin Laden or face military retribution, and as he recalled how Republicans and

Democrats, senators and representatives, had come together on the steps of the Capitol to

sing "God Bless America."

I was always nervous when George spoke before Congress, but on this night, with

all that was at stake, having Tony Blair, Tom Ridge, Rudy Giuliani, and George Pataki

surrounding me was a great comfort.

Both George and I find the presence of close friends and the people we love

comforting. Our whole married life, though, we have been comforted most by each other.

Being nearby was how in those days, weeks, and months we reassured each other. We do

not have to speak; ours is a language not just of words but of a shared presence. We take

comfort simply from knowing that the other one is in the room. We are anchored to each

other. And if it is my nature to be calm, it is also George's to steady and buoy me. We are

two symbiotic souls.

I was anxious, but I was never fearful. And I received so many forms of

unsolicited comfort. My old roommate from Houston, Janet Heyne, told me on the phone

that "the whole time you've been in Washington, I've been so glad that I wasn't you and

that I didn't have to do what you're doing." She went on, "Now I'm jealous for the first

time because you can do something after this horrible tragedy." And I *could* do things,

things that could make a difference. That was my solace, even as the roar of Air Force

fighter planes flying cover patrols echoed through the walls and Secret Service details

conducted new rounds of evacuations because there were reports of a truck bomb waiting

to detonate on a nearby street.

That weekend, September 21, our girls came home. They flew on commercial

airplanes that had just begun returning to the skies. We went to Camp David for Saturday

night and spent Sunday afternoon at the White House, basking in the sunshine. I was so

grateful just to hold them in my arms again. Monday brought a meeting at the White

House with family members and friends of the victims of Flight 93. I read their stories in

the customary White House briefing binders prepared beforehand, but there is almost no

way to be "briefed" on such a visit. Passenger Thomas Burnett had called his wife,

Deena, four times from Flight 93. In the fourth call, he said, "I know we're all going to

die--there's three of us who are going to do something about it. I love you, honey."

Jeremy Glick also managed to phone his wife, Lyzbeth. After they spoke, she gave the

phone to her father, who heard the final screams before the connection went dead. The

GTE phone operator Lisa Jefferson heard Todd Beamer's final words, "Are you ready,

guys? Let's roll." Flight attendant Sandy Bradshaw had called her husband, Phil, and told

him that they were gathering hot water and were going to rush the hijackers. He heard

men on the plane nearby whispering the Twenty-third Psalm, "Yea, though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: For thou art with me." Then

his wife said, "Everyone's running to first class. I've got to go. Bye." In the Blue Room,

under the portraits of Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe, George and I

shook hands and embraced their families, and the families of the other passengers and

crew members who gave their lives on that bright blue morning.

In the evening, I joined Senator Kennedy on the stage of the Kennedy Center for a

concert in remembrance of 9-11. The next morning, I was on a government plane, bound

for New York City.

Manhattan from the air looks doll-size, a perfect expanse of individual buildings

rising from the island. With no way to build out, the city built up, until the thousands of

building tops have meshed together to create a kind of aerial terrain, gleaming mountains

of steel and glass high-rises, shadowy valleys of tenements and brownstones. And now, at

the tip, a cataclysm. We circled the still smoldering wreckage where the Twin Towers

had been, before landing in Newark, New Jersey, and traveling into the city.

My first stop was Madison Square Garden, where I was scheduled to address

three thousand of the city's Learning Leaders, a nearly ten-thousand-strong volunteer

school corps--larger than the U.S. Peace Corps--composed of specially trained parents,

retirees, college students, businesspeople, and senior citizens who donate their time to

New York City students and schools. My role was to help encourage them to return to

their schools and classrooms because the city's children were in desperate need. My

friend Andi Bernstein, who had been one of our co-owners of the Texas Rangers and

whose husband was the business partner of one of George's oldest friends, had asked me

to come. From Madison Square Garden, the motorcade headed south to one of the city's

elementary schools, P.S. 41. That day, P.S. 41 was more than a school packed to bursting.

It was a refuge, as it had been for the last fifteen days.

On the morning of 9-11, students at another school, P.S. 234, an elementary

school for grades pre-K through fifth, were on their playground four blocks from the

Twin Towers. They heard the thunderous crash and saw the first plane hit. Other

children, already in their classrooms, where windows were open to let in the air on that

bright, fresh fall morning, caught sight of the North Tower engulfed in flames.

Within minutes of the attack, many parents had rushed to the school to pick up

their children, but as the streets clogged with evacuees and emergency vehicles racing

south, 150 students remained behind. The school's principal, Anna Switzer, herded them,

their teachers, and a few parents inside. Before the South Tower fell, Switzer and her

teachers lined up the students, ages five to eleven, in a single file and told them to hold

hands. They stepped out of the building into the ash and smoke. Some looked up and

watched as men and women flung themselves from the upper floors of the towers, their

bodies passing through the billowing flames. One child said, "The birds are on fire."

Running, some being carried, others being pulled, they moved north. Moments

later, the air rumbled and the South Tower fell. The torrent of dust blotted out all signs of

sky and sun. Students and teachers at the front of the line kept going north. Switzer

grabbed those at the rear and raced back into the school's basement. "The day turned into

night, and we ran for our lives," she later recalled. At first, Switzer did not know if her

caravan of students and teachers who had left survived. They did, walking and running

about a mile and a half north to the sheltering brick walls of P.S. 41.

Not only were many of the P.S. 234 students forced from their school but their

families also had to abandon their homes for weeks or even months. Staff, parents, and

children in both schools, P.S. 41 and 234, had friends who had died.

With rescue workers using the school building and the Trade Center site still

aflame, the P.S. 234 children and teachers were sharing the classrooms at P.S. 41; two

sets of students and two teachers were crowded into each room. I was there that morning

to try to comfort them. I spoke to the children, and I read the storybook *I Love You, Little*

One while, in the back of the classroom, teachers wept into their hands.

Governor George Pataki's wife, Libby, had joined me at the school. Now we were

on our way to Engine Company 54 and Ladder Company 4 in lower Manhattan. The fire

battalion had lost fifteen firefighters. The sidewalk in front had become a makeshift

memorial of candles, notes, and flowers. The flowers were stacked one bouquet on top of

another, creating a slowly fading mound. We placed our own fresh bouquets of

sunflowers on the sidewalk and went inside to meet the men who remained. They were

the ones who hadn't been on duty that day, who had been somewhere else when their

friends suited up and raced south, climbing the stairs of the North Tower in full gear,

including helmets and oxygen tanks, and wearing the locator devices that are designed to

chirp so firefighters who fall in the dark can be found. I think sometimes of all those

chirpers that suddenly went silent.

Inside the firehouse, the men were grieving. Unlike the grief of the teachers,

which was laced with fear and uncertainty for the future, this was a very different grief-raw, aching, and angry.

The next week, on October 2, George and I went out to dinner in Washington,

D.C., with Mayor Anthony Williams and his wife, Diane, at Morton's, a steakhouse.

Across the country, people had stopped going to shopping malls and to restaurants. They

had stopped flying on airplanes and staying in hotels. No one could promise them that

other strikes would not come. But now, in addition to all the fears of another terror attack,

George was concerned that the economy would spiral into a full-blown crisis. We had

already been in a recession from the bursting of the dot-com bubble. He did not want the

specter of more people losing their jobs, of storefronts being boarded up and businesses

going bankrupt. It's not a large gesture for a president to go out to dinner, but we hoped

that by doing so we might encourage other Americans. It was why George wanted them

to shop, to fly on commercial airlines, and to travel again--those were all ways to bolster

business. If the terrorists had succeeded in undermining our economy too, they would

have scored a double blow.

The White House was abuzz with foreign leaders arriving for meetings with

George. They came for Oval Office sit-downs and for small working lunches and dinners,

at times with their spouses. On September 28, I hosted Jordan's Queen Rania for a coffee

while her husband, King Abdullah, talked terrorism and security with George. In all, over

the next six months, more than twenty-five foreign leaders would fly to Washington to

meet with George, and he would keep in near constant touch with others by phone. I also

wanted to invite friends over. As the blistering intensity of the early days continued

unabated, I felt very strongly that every so often George needed an hour or two to clear

his mind, or at least to have the distraction and the comfort of longtime friends. From

before dawn each morning, he was reading threat assessments and reviewing retaliation

options. I wanted him to have a few brief moments of respite. So our friends came: Penny

Slade-Sawyer, who had been one of our good friends when we moved back to Midland

and who now lived in Northern Virginia, as well as Joan and Jim Doty, whom we had

met in 1988 during Gampy's campaign, and other friends scattered around Washington.

At the start of October, our longtime friends from Lubbock, Mike and Nancy Weiss,

came for a few days. We took immeasurable comfort in seeing all of them.

On Friday, October 5, we traveled to Camp David with Mike and Nancy. We had

known them since George's race for Congress back in 1978. Mike was an accountant who

had been George's Lubbock County chairman for the campaign; the two had met in the

back of a men's clothing store when George had dropped by to introduce himself and

shake hands. Mike had supported George on every run since, even moving to Austin to

help George set up the Texas budget office, and Nancy and I had spent countless

mornings walking around the city's lake trails. They were with us to lend their

companionship and friendship, but as we ate our meals or took brief walks at the edge of

the Catoctin Mountains, George knew what was to come. I knew as well. He spent most

of the weekend closeted with his staff, and in the evening, when we were alone, he talked

about sending our forces into combat. I knew how anxious he was; along with the fears of

more terrorism, he now had the added worry of the safety of our own troops. There was

no precedent for this type of war and for what would have to be done. But he and I said

nothing about it to Mike and Nancy.

On Sunday morning, on our return to Washington, we stopped at the National

Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland, to honor firefighters who had

died during the year. Over three hundred firefighters had perished on 9-11. When we

landed at the White House, George left to prepare for his remarks to the nation. I took

Mike and Nancy upstairs, into our bedroom, and told them: at one o'clock that afternoon,

George was going to announce the first round of bomb and missile strikes against the

Taliban rulers in Afghanistan. He would speak from the Treaty Room, the place where

other presidents had pursued peace, with the Washington Monument and Jefferson

Memorial rising in the background. A few doors down, technicians were adjusting the

lights and checking the audio feed, and George was reading his speech a final time. I

turned on the television and got in bed; Nancy and Mike drew up chairs beside me,

although Nancy later told me that she felt like getting in bed too.

George's voice was steady as he spoke, but I knew the consequences. Twenty-six

days after 9-11, my husband was formally announcing military action. The Taliban had

ignored every ultimatum. "The battle is now joined on many fronts. We will not waver,

we will not tire, we will not falter, and we will not fail," he said. Less than two hours

before, American and British forces had launched the first strikes on the cities of Kabul

and Kandahar. Missiles and bombs would be followed by drops of food, medicine, and

transistor radios that were tuned to a message broadcast for the people of Afghanistan.

George had been given update reports on the military plans since before we boarded

Marine One that morning. "Peace and freedom will prevail," he said as we watched him

on the television screen.

In our system of government, while Congress is the body that can officially

declare war, presidents are the ones who make the ultimate call to send our troops into

battle. My father-in-law had done it at the start of 1991; four presidents--John F.

Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Gerald Ford--had presided over a single

war: Vietnam. After two years of Nazi aggression in Europe, Franklin Roosevelt took the

country to war against Japan and then Germany in 1941. Harry Truman had the Korean

War, although it was undeclared, and every post-World War II president through George

H. W. Bush had faced the nuclear specter of the Cold War. The history lessons are easy;

what is hard to find are the words to convey my emotions when my husband had to

commit precious American lives to combat. In his speech, George spoke of a letter he had

received from a fourth-grade girl whose father was in the military. "As much as I don't

want my dad to fight," she wrote, "I'm willing to give him to you." I pictured the faces of

the sailors and Marines on the cruisers in San Diego, where I had gone for my first

Troops to Teachers event, six months ago; I thought of the Navy personnel who sat

alongside us in the chapel at Camp David; I thought of the faces of the men and women

in uniform who had met us at the Pentagon, of the injured at Walter Reed. They were

people with names, with hometowns, with parents, spouses, and families, and they were

willing to give themselves and their lives so that other dads and moms going to work on a

quiet, late-summer morning might never know terror again.

For months, I would lie in bed at night or wake in the darkness and think of our

troops, think of them sleeping on cold, hard ground beneath the unforgiving Afghan

winds, and feel guilty that I had a warm room and a warm bed while they risked

everything. At Camp David, on that first Sunday morning after 9-11, our chaplain, Navy

Lieutenant Bob Williams, had selected as the scripture reading Psalm 27, "I shall see the

goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." I knew that goodness wore camouflage

and khaki; it wore Army green, Navy white, Marine tan, and Air Force blue.

The first anthrax-laced letters were mailed from Princeton, New Jersey, on

September 18, 2001. Four were addressed to major New York City media companies,

including to the NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw; a fifth letter arrived at the offices

of American Media, a tabloid newspaper and magazine company in Florida. The Florida

letter killed a photo editor and nearly killed a mail room employee. Robert Stevens died

on October 5, two days before George gave the final order for attacks to begin on the

Taliban. Then, on October 12, five days after our air strikes began, an assistant to Tom

Brokaw tested positive for skin anthrax, an infection marked by sores or boils that can

spread to the bloodstream if left untreated. Anthrax was found at ABC and CBS news, as

well as the *New York Post,* and each news organization had at least one employee with a

confirmed case of skin anthrax. On October 15, the anthrax reached Washington, D.C.

Contaminated letters had been sent to Senators Tom Daschle and Patrick Leahy. The Hart

Senate Office Building was evacuated and shut down, and all mail, including all mail to

the White House, was quarantined. But no one thought to close the post office that had

processed the mail. Two employees at the Brentwood postal facility, Thomas Morris Jr.

and Joseph Curseen Jr., would die from inhaled anthrax; two others would fall ill but,

after prolonged treatment with antibiotics, would recover. The entire mail facility, along

with the Hart Building, would be sealed shut while chlorine gas was pumped in to kill

any remaining bacteria. October was the month of anthrax. Suddenly, threats seemed no

longer confined to the sky; they were coming from all directions.

The White House was now literally cut off. Any letter or package being sent was

entombed in an off-site facility. Letters could not reach us, not even ones from fourthgrade girls. It was impossible to send any kind of envelope to the White House grounds.

For years, the mail sat in sacks, unopened and waiting to be irradiated. Even the finished

art by Adrian Martinez that we had chosen back in the hot months of summer to adorn

our holiday card vanished for three years inside those mail sacks. Hallmark had mailed it

back, along with the final proof for the card. They had to rush to create another proof, and

the president of Hallmark met me on the tarmac of the airport in Waco, Texas, during a

stopover so I could approve the proof before the final printing began.

The mail was the last severed link to much of the outside world. During the spring

and summer, after we had moved in, I would occasionally sit in my small, private upstairs

office and gaze out at the lines of tourists streaming through the White House doors,

people who had waited in line for hours to see the East Room, the State Dining Room,

the Blue, Red, and Green rooms. But since September 12, the doors had been closed.

There were no tours; the grounds were deserted except for the clusters of sharpshooters

who paced the roof and patrolled among the trees. I grew accustomed to heavily armed

men in black combat gear walking in through the doors from the Rose Garden and bombsniffing dogs making their rounds in the previously placid corridors of the East Wing.

Sharpshooters hung out the windows of our convoys, and helicopters hovered above our

destinations. The flak jackets that we had worn for the trip into Kosovo seemed like a

quaint memory; we were now living with danger all around us, so that every errant

sound, every fast-moving plane made me lift my eyes to scan the sky.

Inside the White House, the stillness was almost deafening. Gone now was the tan

and brown folding screen that had been routinely spread across the ground-floor Cross

Hall, allowing the president or me, or anyone else coming from the upstairs residence, to

pass through the corridor unseen by tour groups or other visitors. In this emptiness, there

was no longer any need for a protective screen.

When George and I were visiting the Blairs at Chequers the previous summer,

Gary Walters, the head White House usher, had called to tell me that painters and

plasterers had found a false wall in the large upstairs Cross Hall in the residence. The

Cross Hall had not had a new coat of paint since the Reagan administration. The White

House walls are plaster with canvas stretched on top, so this time when they repainted

they removed the canvas to repair the plaster, and at the entry to the Yellow Oval Room

found bookshelves dating from Truman's term that had been covered, probably by Jackie

Kennedy. The shelves emerged, looking freshly painted and perfectly preserved, although

no one on the staff had known that they were there. They also discovered delicately

carved shells in niches above two doors along the hallway. The White House is a home

that gives up its secrets one by one.

Although it was George Washington who chose the site for the White House, the

first president to live inside its walls was John Adams. But little of the Adams era

survives; the house was torched by the British in 1814, during the War of 1812, and had

to be rebuilt. Its first major renovation was by Theodore Roosevelt, who tore down great

glass conservatories erected to grow fruits and flowers for the first family and built the

West Wing offices in 1902. He also transformed the ground floor from a cooking and

laundry area with bedrooms for White House servants and staff, including a separate

room for the fireman who manned the house's enormous furnace, into receiving and

reception rooms for the president and his guests. By 1948, the house's interior was so

fragile it was in danger of collapsing. Harry and Bess Truman moved across the street to

Blair House, and the building was gutted down to its original brick walls and completely

rebuilt. Jackie Kennedy updated many of the interior decorations and made changes to

the family living quarters, and subsequent first ladies have added their own personal

touches, transforming carpeting and wall and window coverings, moving furniture, and

adding art.

But above all, the White House is a living, breathing place; even in the public

rooms, there is always some flux. The Green Room, now a formal sitting room on the

State Floor, began as a bedchamber and then a breakfast room for Thomas Jefferson;

James Monroe made it into a card parlor. Many commentators hated its various iterations

of green color, particularly Andrew Jackson's. Only in 1962 did Jackie Kennedy select its

well-known waterfall green silk wall coverings. The State Dining Room was originally

Thomas Jefferson's office, and even after it became a dining room, Theodore Roosevelt

hung large mounted moose heads on its walls. The Map Room, which we frequently used

as a waiting place for formal receiving lines, was the room where FDR monitored the

progress of U.S. forces during World War II. Before that, it had housed Woodrow

Wilson's billiard table. I knew whatever I did was temporary; it was merely to keep and

care for the house. Other administrations would make changes of their own.

When we first arrived, I had set about redoing the girls' rooms and the Treaty

Room (in the residence). But that was only the start. The White House is a home, but a

home that accommodates more than 100,000 people a year. Hundreds alone came for

small events upstairs in our residence quarters. Butlers, maintenance staff, and White

House staff and employees also walk across the carpets and hallways, because it is a

place of business as well as a residence. And it is an old, historic home, making the need

to refurbish almost constant. Painters literally walk around with cans and brushes,

constantly touching up scuff marks, streaks, and nicks on the walls.

So it was a strange incongruity that, as the White House was being emptied of all

but essential personnel, I was going room by room to see what was in need of repair.

When my father-in-law was president, Bar and I would walk the house some

nights, in the quiet dark, switching on lights, exploring the Red, Green, and Blue rooms

in a kind of perfect stillness, wondering who else had, on other nights, also walked there.

For days after we moved in, I found that each room in the residence reminded me of Bar

and Gampy, of some moment or memory that we had made during their four years.

Indeed, despite its museumlike atmosphere, the White House remains a home.

Until the Kennedys arrived, many presidential families did most of their living

downstairs, amid the vintage furnishings. They ate their meals in the old Family Dining

Room, a small, square space that abuts the large State Dining Room. George would

sometimes host working lunches and dinners for foreign leaders there; otherwise, it is a

quasi-storage room used to plate the food for official dinners and other functions.

The upstairs, until the time of Theodore Roosevelt, had housed the president's

office space--the famous Lincoln Bedroom actually served as Lincoln's office; his aides

occupied a room across the hall, and visitors congregated in a small sitting area in

between. Just a doorway away from the offices was the corridor for the family bedrooms.

Our room was the traditional first lady's bedroom, while the president's bedroom was our

sitting room. Not until Gerald and Betty Ford took up residence at the White House did

the custom of a separate presidential bedroom officially end. Before that, a host of

American presidents--from Abraham Lincoln to Woodrow Wilson, Calvin Coolidge,

Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon--chose

separate but usually adjoining rooms for themselves and their wives.

I decorated our room in a soothing blend of pale celadon green and cream,

covering the walls, headboard, and curtains in a fabric designed by Peter Fasano, with

wide, round tables by the bedside to hold books for reading. George's table was stacked

with history books. We were at home in the past almost everywhere we turned.

Jenna's room had also been the bedroom for Caroline Kennedy, who liked to

creep down the massive marble staircase nearby and peek at her parents' guests through

the balusters, as well as for Lynda Bird Johnson, and Chelsea Clinton, and President

Taft's sons, Robert and Charles, while Barbara's room next door had rested the sleepy

heads of John F. Kennedy Jr., Luci Johnson, Tricia Nixon, and Amy Carter. The room

that Jackie Kennedy had designated as the upstairs presidential dining room was once the

bedroom where Alice Roosevelt, Teddy Roosevelt's daughter, remembered having her

appendix removed. By the late 1940s, the room's floor was so unsound that a leg of

Margaret Truman's piano broke through the boards.

Over time, the upstairs residence became a collection of sitting and guest rooms.

In 1902, Theodore Roosevelt's large family necessitated going up into the attic, which

had its dusty spaces partitioned to create a few new, small bedrooms. Calvin and Grace

Coolidge oversaw the replacement of the White House roof in 1927, building in the

process an entire finished third floor, which was enlarged and redone by Harry and Bess

Truman. Married presidential children, including the Fords' and the Carters', made their

Washington homes in suites of rooms up there, and Hillary Clinton's mother and my

mother were most at home in a third-floor room tucked under the eaves.

Under doctor's orders to get out of the Oval Office during the middle of the day as

World War II raged, FDR would eat lunch in the third-floor "sky parlor" added by Grace

Coolidge. The Trumans transformed it into a rectangular solarium. President Eisenhower

liked to barbecue on the parapet outside when he and Mamie weren't eating their dinner

on TV trays downstairs in the West Sitting Hall, sitting side by side, each watching his or

her own television. Mamie preferred *I Love Lucy,* while Ike chose westerns. Both did

sometimes watch the news. The solarium was also the room where Lynda and Luci

Johnson entertained their teenage friends and where Caroline Kennedy for a while had a

tiny, private preschool and an at times solitary playroom. And over the years, it became a

favorite place for male guests and sometimes presidents to smoke cigars.

Each room that I entered had a history, each piece of furniture a past, whether it

was the antique English canopy bed that had been finished in 1775, a year before

American independence, or the table and bookcase made from the original 1817 wood

used to finish the White House roof after British troops had set it aflame, or the collection

of framed silhouettes, including one of President John Tyler that had survived a

shipwreck in the English Channel. And it was not just the intimacies of the daily lives of

other first families that we felt as the years passed, but their private sufferings that were

also contained within these walls.

Every day I walked by the room where Willie Lincoln had died in February of

1862 after a two-week battle with a typhoidlike illness, probably contracted from

contaminated water in a nearby canal, water that was drunk at the White House and a

canal where children played. Mary Todd Lincoln spent hours at his bedside as he was

plied with everything from Peruvian bark to beef tea. The night that he took sick, the

Lincolns were hosting a party in the East Room. The orchestra strains rose up to the room

as Willie's parents scurried back and forth between his bedside and their guests. The last

ones departed late into the night, and as their coaches clattered off, Willie's fever was

rising. After his death, Mary Todd Lincoln refused ever again to enter that room, or the

Green Room, where his body had been embalmed. The Lincoln biographer Carl

Sandburg would write that there were thirty-one rooms in the White House, but Lincoln

was not at home in any of them. And Willie Lincoln was not the only child to die while

residing in the White House.

The Coolidges lost their sixteen-year-old son, Calvin Jr., to blood poisoning, or

septicemia, in July of 1924. He had developed an infected blister after playing one of his

favorite sports, tennis, on the rear grounds of the White House. The Coolidges stayed at

their son's bedside, but doctors could offer them nothing. "When he was suffering, he

begged me to help him, but I could not," Coolidge later wrote. On July 4, as workers

were readying the White House grounds for celebrations and fireworks, Calvin Jr. was

rushed to Walter Reed. He died three days later. Coolidge openly wept in the Oval Office

and later said that if he had not been president, his son would not have suffered a raised

blister playing lawn tennis on the South Grounds. Jackie Kennedy had lost an infant son

just three and a half months before her husband was assassinated. And three first ladies-Letitia Tyler, Caroline Harrison, and Ellen Wilson--died while they lived in the White

House. Presidents suffered too. After his own stroke, Woodrow Wilson, his left side

paralyzed and barely able to write his name, retreated to the East Room, where with

curtains drawn, he spent hours watching the flickering reels of silent films lent by a local

theater. He was just sixty-three years old.

I was always aware of the brave faces that other families had placed on their

personal tragedies and on the way that the demands of the White House gave no time for

grief, even less for reflection. "The funeral is a very solemn affair," wrote William

Stoddard, an aide to President Lincoln about Willie's funeral in the East Room, where

cabinet secretaries, senators, ambassadors, and soldiers choked back tears. "But it cannot

be permitted to interfere overmuch with work. The burden is increased rather than laid

aside."

Five days after American and British fighters began strikes on the Taliban's

strongholds, as additional U.S. Special Forces readied themselves to enter the bleak,

mountainous Afghanistan terrain on the backs of horses, weapons slung over their sides, I

accompanied George to the Pentagon for a service to mark the one-month anniversary of

9-11. We traveled across the Potomac over streets that had been cleared and sealed off to

form an almost perfect security bubble. There could be no more casual breaches of the

perimeter. We were in a constant state of vigilance, always saving some awareness for

wherever we were standing. This morning was no different, except for the addition of an

F-16 fighter cover, flying low and close above the Pentagon.

The hijacked plane had penetrated the entire outer ring, and a good portion of the

river side of the building was charred with layers of thick, black soot. But what lingered

for weeks, even after the cranes had arrived and the debris began to be collected, was a

fierce smell, the noxious, deep scent of burning jet fuel, building materials, and human

remains. It was a smell that burned the throat and stung the nostrils, a smell so strong that

even commuters in closed subway cars racing underneath the World Trade Center site

inhaled it for months after 9-11. And it remained at the Pentagon. We looked at the gouge

in the building, and I looked into the somber faces of the men and women who were

embarking upon a war.

Before fifteen thousand people, George spoke of a wound to the building that

would not be forgotten but that would be repaired. In an overwhelming bit of irony, it

was on September 11, 1941, that construction on the Pentagon had first begun. As the

cameras clicked, both of us had tears in our eyes.

I felt the grief again at a memorial service sponsored by Elayne Bennett's Best

Friends organization for three exceptional eleven-year-old Washington, D.C., students

who were on Flight 77 with their teacher, bound for a special National Geographic

program on California's Channel Islands. So many lives lost, each one exceptional to

someone.

On October 16, five weeks after the attacks, I was attempting to return my official

life to a regular routine. I had committed months before to teach in different schools

across the country for Teach for America Week, highlighting the program and its efforts

to get bright and eager college graduates into some of the nation's toughest classrooms.

Teach for America recruits commit to spending two years teaching in public schools in

low-income communities. During Teach for America Week, professionals from all across

the country spend an hour teaching children in public school classrooms.

There are those who dismiss school visits as photo ops, but there is so much more

to them than that. There is a chance to connect with the students and the teachers, to

convey how much they are valued. And every school that I visited was thoroughly vetted,

so being selected was a significant badge of honor. Many of the schools I saw were in

rough areas; they were not wealthy schools, even though the districts had rushed to

spruce them up. George and I always noted that we could smell the coats of new paint

before we even stepped through the doorways. But paint couldn't camouflage rusty pipes,

ancient bathrooms, and dilapidated desks. Or the neighborhoods that I saw on the drives

in--graffiti-covered walls, stray bullet holes, abandoned buildings, and makeshift

cardboard where glass windows should have been. There were piles of trash, chain-link

fences around asphalt blacktops, and hardly anything green, such as a patch of grass to

play on.

That week, I was scheduled to teach in Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Maryland;

Atlanta, Georgia; and Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My second stop was the South

Seventeenth Street Elementary School in Newark, New Jersey, where I was to teach a

kindergarten class. South Seventeenth Street Elementary was similar to the John F.

Kennedy Elementary School in Houston; 453 of its 537 students were eligible for free

and reduced-price lunch, and the majority of them were African-American. Mark

Williams, the kindergarten teacher, had graduated from college just over a year before.

He had painted a bright mural on his classroom walls.

I spoke to the students and read a story. At one point, a little girl snuggled up next

to me and tugged on my arm to whisper in my ear. I bent my head and listened to her

hushed, solemn voice. "Did you hear," she asked, "about the buildings?" I very slowly

nodded my head. "The bad men knocked them down and all the people died," she said,

and then asked, "What do you think about what happened?" I wrapped my arms around

her and said, "I'm sad." And she nodded and said, "I'm sad too."

In Baton Rouge, on the morning of October 19, I taught at the Eden Park

Elementary School, and then, instead of flying directly back to D.C., I made a stop at the

ranch. George had left for China for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit. He

had wanted to decline, but the Chinese were determined that the event go forward and

had made elaborate plans to host the Pacific Rim nations, so he made the trip. When he

arrived, he called me to say that all of Shanghai was a ghost town. The Chinese had

cleared it out for the conference; almost 16 million people had been moved. With George

away, I did not want to spend the weekend in the White House alone. I invited my good

friend Debbie Francis to spend Saturday night at the ranch with me. We were sitting in

the living room after dinner, having a glass of wine and talking, when my Secret Service

agents burst in. They had received warning of an impending attack on our ranch. I was

shocked. When I didn't immediately leave the house, the agents told us to turn off all the

lights, and they moved the convoy of blast-proof vehicles into the driveway so we could

run to the road if necessary. Debbie and I sat in the pitch black and kept talking, although

I'm sure for her it must have seemed unnerving to sit in total darkness before we made

our way to bed, where we would try to sleep, waiting for an attack that never came.

There were many such warnings, whispered in my ear when I was at an event or

even sitting on a sofa in the White House residence, having a quick cup of coffee with a

friend. I would be told of a suspicious plane or vehicle or other concern. One time, when

Barbara and Jenna were home on a spring break and we were sitting in the living room

with some of their friends, we heard the agents' footsteps pounding down the hall. They

raced in and told us that we had to go to the bunker. Everyone jumped up and started

running down the hallway to the long, slick marble stairs. Panting, we made it the three

long flights down. Then word came that it was only a stray plane that had violated the

protected airspace.

We had another evacuation incident in the spring of 2005, when Nancy Reagan

was staying with us to attend a lunch that I was hosting in her honor. Again, the agents

appeared to hustle us down to the bunker, but this time I insisted on taking the elevator. I

was not going to make Nancy Reagan walk down three steep flights of marble stairs. So

we dropped in our elevator cage to the subterranean bunker. After we arrived, fighter jets

intercepted the plane. It was a pilot from Pennsylvania who had mistakenly strayed into

the restricted airspace. Months after the incident, he ran into someone I knew and said,

"Please tell Mrs. Bush that I am so sorry."

But there was no way of knowing which threats were accidents and which were

real. We grew used to dashing down to the bunker, to always being a bit more aware. It

came with our new lives.

George read the daily threat assessments, the pages upon pages of worrisome

plots, activities, and chatter. He didn't bring it all home, but he brought enough that I

could see the lines cut deeper in his face and could hear him next to me lying awake at

night, his mind still working.

But whatever our private anxieties, our public lives required us to go on. Just

three days after the ranch scare, I visited the National Gallery to tour its new exhibition of

Renaissance art, featuring a portrait by Leonardo da Vinci.

It is hard to recall now just how empty parts of the nation were in the months after

9-11, especially museums, movie theaters, malls, restaurants, and hotels. Washington,

D.C., hotels were all but vacant. There was a collective unease about large public spaces,

and one of the things that mattered most was interrupting that cycle of fear. I walked

through the National Gallery of Art with its charming and smart director, Rusty Powell,

and the exhibition's wonderful curator, Russell Sale. Over the years, I would visit many

exhibitions in Washington, usually quietly, just to take in the beauty and power of the

creations. In a time of destruction, art reminds us of the ennobling impulses that exist in

human beings, the desire to create, to beautify, to build, to educate, and to make

something that will last for generations. Art and artists are among our bulwarks against

ruthless terrorists who would fashion bombs or commandeer and crash planes. Art

reminds us too that time passes and things change; peace may not always be permanent,

but neither is war. On that morning, going to this museum, I brought the press with me. If

I was unafraid to go, perhaps others would begin to feel the same. And I remember the

gratitude of Rusty Powell and Russell Sale, for the simple effort of my coming. "You just

can't know," they said, "what it meant for a first lady to come to the museum at all, and

then to come so soon after 9-11."

But there were still moments when fear crept in.

On Monday, October 29, a second national terror alert was issued. The FBI

announced that it expected terror strikes against the United States, either at home or

abroad. Among the most specific warnings, the CIA believed that al Qaeda had plans to

attack a nuclear facility with a hijacked aircraft. The next day, we were back in New

York City.

George had been asked to throw out the first pitch at the opening New York home

game of the World Series, where the Yankees were playing the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Barbara came down from Yale to be with me, and we were perched in the box of George

Steinbrenner, the Yankees' owner. George would be walking onto the field alone. He

would stride from the dugout to the empty mound and stand with no agents beside him

and a packed crowd filling every seat in the stands. George was focused on his pitch.

Under the stadium, as George was warming up, the Yankees star Derek Jeter had already

asked him if he was going to throw from the mound. As George worried about throwing a

strike, I was worried about far more. Every entry point had metal detectors; bombsniffing dogs roamed the grounds, and sharpshooters took up positions on the roof.

Evacuation information flashed across the scoreboard as both teams began batting

practice. The official start to the evening was a phalanx of fighter jets flying overhead,

after which we all observed a moment of silence to honor the fallen and our troops. The

flag that snapped in the air was one recovered from the wreckage at Ground Zero, where

buried fires were still smoking. It was partially torn and missing twelve stars.

I smiled and watched as my husband raised his arm and hurled the ball straight

into the grooved leather of the catcher's mitt. I heard the chants of "USA, USA, USA,"

but inside my heart was racing, my hands were cold, and my mind was wondering, What

if? It was the same feeling that followed me when I glanced at pro football stadiums

packed for weekend games or when we began planning the 2002 National Book Festival.

For a long time afterward, I would look up at the sky and wonder, Are we going to see

something else? Every night, I went to bed wondering, What will tomorrow bring?

The next day, Halloween, we met at the White House with the families of the two

postal workers who had died the previous week in the anthrax attacks. Joseph Curseen

was forty-seven and had spent fifteen years with the post office. Thomas Morris was

fifty-five and had been a postal employee for twenty-eight years. Both left behind wives

and children. They had merely been in a place that had processed infected mail bound for

the Capitol. Unspoken in the room, as we shook hands with the postmaster general, was

the question of whether there would be more such envelopes in the weeks and months to

come. Anthrax had already been found at a remote White House mail site, and on

Monday, after the new threat assessment, the Secret Service had locked down all the

gates at the White House.

The fall deepened, and more foreign leaders came. Over the course of six days,

the presidents of Nigeria and Algeria, Jacques Chirac of France, and Tony Blair flew to

Washington to meet with George. But I was focused on another significant meeting:

Vladimir Putin and Lyudmila Putina were about to become our first official guests at the

ranch. They were heading to New York for the United Nations General Assembly

meeting and then to visit us. I still didn't have all my furniture for the guesthouse--I was

frantically borrowing some from my friend and decorator Ken Blasingame. And the day I

flew to the ranch to finish the preparations, I first had to give a speech before three

hundred journalists sitting amid a sea of banquet tables and starched white cloths at the

National Press Club in downtown Washington.

The Secret Service advance team had arrived hours beforehand, walking the

hallways with a bomb-sniffing dog. My speech was originally going to be about

education, but it was now about something more, about the country I had found after 911. I told of seeing flags waving in front of almost every home and building up and down

the streets of Chicago when I arrived a week after 9-11 to tape a television interview with

Oprah Winfrey, and of the memorial service at the Pentagon, where a single woman

stood up to wave her flag during the singing of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and

how we all stood after that, waving our flags and singing, tears filling our eyes. I told

about the women from a Jewish synagogue outside Washington, D.C., who volunteered

to shop for Muslim women who were afraid to go out on their own, and about the woman

in New York who called her rabbi a few days before she was set to give birth and told

him that she wanted to name her child after a World Trade Center victim who didn't have

a child of his own. She said good-bye by telling Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, "I promise that I

will try to have more children because I know there are so many more names." I told of

an art student who signed up to join the military and of hundreds of Washington, D.C.,

students whose families can't afford to buy lunch but who pinched pennies to give me

$173.64 for the Afghan Children's Fund. I spoke of children in Southern California who

in early October, before the anthrax attacks, raised $85.75 for Afghan children at their

sidewalk lemonade stand and sent the money to the White House, with a letter to the

president signed "Your citizens."

If we set aside one day to honor each victim of 9-11, it would take us nearly a

decade to complete our tribute. There were, at final count, 2,973 innocent dead from that

morning. I closed by saying, "Americans are willing to fight and die for our freedoms,

but more importantly, we are willing to live for them." And when I look back now at that

fall, for all the worry and the darkness, I do still see, as the Psalmist said, so much

goodness in the land of the living.

In sixth grade, our big class project was to write a country report. I painstakingly

copied mine into a green notebook, with a green and gold compass that my mother helped

me design to decorate the cover. My research came from the encyclopedia, what all

elementary school students in Midland used back then. At home, we didn't have a set of

leather-bound Britannicas or World Books; Mother and Daddy hadn't wanted to spend

the money on them. Instead, our encyclopedia set came from the grocery store. Mother

"earned" it one volume at a time as part of a special promotion; whenever she spent a

certain amount of money at the store, she received a coupon good for one or two

volumes.

The moment I got the assignment, I decided to pick a country that sounded

completely exotic and remote compared to anything I knew in Midland, Texas. Our

teacher, Mr. Bain, told us to look at a map of the world, and I ran my finger around and

picked the crossing point for the ancient Silk Road. And so my sixth-grade country report

was on Afghanistan, a nation I never thought that I would encounter again.

The Afghanistan I wrote about in 1957 was very different from the one the United

States was confronting in 2001. For thousands of years, it has been a land of high

mountain ranges, sweeping desert, and remote green valleys, where goats and sheep

grazed and orchards were planted. Landlocked, it was never totally isolated. Trade routes

between West and East snaked across its harsh terrain. Nomadic peoples from the

Mongolian steppes used its corridors to push east toward Persia or south to India, and it

was invaded from the west as well. Alexander the Great conquered Afghanistan in 329

b.c. on his way to India; Arab armies came in the 600s; and Genghis Khan left a trail of

carnage in 1219. In the 1300s, Tamerlane made Afghanistan part of his Central Asian

empire. Afghanistan became its own confluence of cultures--Persian, Turkic Central

Asian, and Indo-Persian--along what would become the Pakistani border. It was tribal

and diverse, and repeatedly caught between other empires. In the nineteenth century, the

British and the Russians used Afghanistan as a wedge between their two dominions. In

the mid-twentieth century, as I was writing my sixth-grade report, Afghanistan was a

pawn between the Soviet Union and the Americans in the Cold War. It was technically a

nonaligned nation, and its king and prime minister were hoping to benefit from playing

one side against the other. From 1955 to 1957, the United States gave Afghanistan more

than $30 million in economic aid. The following year, the Afghan prime minister came to

Washington, D.C., and addressed both the House of Representatives and the Senate. But

by 1960, the Russians had given $300 million in economic aid to Afghanistan, and its

prime minister was meeting with Nikita Khrushchev. After that, the United States largely

ceded Afghanistan to Russia's sphere of influence and began looking to other nations

arrayed across the vast, global Cold War chessboard.

But this period was notable in other ways, particularly for women. In 1959

Afghanistan formally abolished the requirement that women wear a veil and a chadri, a

shroudlike head-to-toe covering. By 1965 women were allowed to vote in national

assembly elections, and soon after a woman was made the minister of public health.

Women became teachers and doctors and ran businesses; eventually 40 percent worked in

paying jobs. They played sports, watched movies, wore skirts and heels, and the few

well-to-do copied the fashions in Tehran.

Then in the early 1970s, a severe drought hit. Crops failed, and much of the

country's sheep population, a key source of meat, perished. Hunger was rampant, and as

many as eighty thousand people died of starvation before international food aid could

reach them. From there came coups and then the overthrow of the government. A

communist faction took control, but the Soviet Union was still not pleased, and in

December of 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. Jimmy Carter announced a U.S.

boycott of the 1980 Moscow Summer Olympics in protest, and no American athletes

participated.

United States-and Middle Eastern-backed Afghan mujahideen fighters drove the

Soviets out ten years later, after the country had been largely left in ruins and 1.5 million

Afghans had been killed. Five years later, in 1994, as George was running against Ann

Richards for Texas governor, some of those mujahideen regrouped, found fresh recruits,

and became the Taliban.

Like most of America, I didn't pay much attention to the Taliban and Afghanistan

in the 1990s, although some women did, among them Mavis Leno, wife of the comedian

Jay Leno, who made the repression of women in Afghanistan her personal cause. But in

the weeks after September 11, what I learned horrified me. Starting in 1994, when they

came to power over swaths of Afghanistan, the Taliban imposed a brand of sharia law

never before seen in the modern Muslim world. They shut down girls' schools and

banned women from working outside their homes. They destroyed television sets, banned

dancing and music because it "creates a strain in the mind and hampers the study of

Islam." They required men to grow long beards and women to cover themselves in the

heaviest and most restrictive style of burka. Women, they decreed, should be neither seen

nor heard; otherwise they would tempt men and lead them away from the path of Islam.

When the Taliban seized Kabul, they closed the university. Ten thousand

students, including four thousand women, could no longer study. Schools for boys

suffered too, because the majority of teachers were women. By December of 1998,

UNICEF reported that in Afghanistan nine out of every ten girls and two out of every

three boys could no longer attend school. Then the religious police began to patrol the

streets, beating women who might venture out alone, beating women who were not

dressed properly, beating women who so much as laughed out loud. Women were

ordered not to wear shoes that made noise. The Taliban closed female bathhouses and

hair salons.

The repercussions for an already impoverished country were staggering. After

half a decade of Taliban rule, 70 percent of the Afghan people were malnourished, one in

four children would not live past the age of five, and mothers routinely died in childbirth.

Old was age forty-five.

The more I read, in books and briefing papers, and the more I listened to Condi

Rice, to George, and to others, the more heartbroken I became. It was late, very late, but

after years of repression, the United States needed to speak out on behalf of these women.

And we needed to do more than talk; we needed to reach out and help them.

I became passionate about the women of Afghanistan and their children, children

who had been scarred not just by sharia law but by the near constant violence of Taliban

attacks and civil war. According to reports from UNICEF, almost three-quarters of the

children in Kabul had lost a family member during the years of conflict. Half of the

children in the capital had watched someone be killed by a rocket or artillery, and many

more had witnessed corpses and dismembered body parts scattered along city streets.

Most no longer trusted adults, and most did not expect to survive themselves. On

November 17, George was slated to give his weekly presidential radio address on

conditions in Afghanistan, and his longtime advisor and now Counselor to the President

Karen Hughes raised the idea that I speak for part of it. Karen had been with us since

George's early days as governor. We valued her counsel, her creative thought, and her

years of unselfish service. Her bright spirits made her a dear friend as well.

George responded, "Why not have Laura give all of it?" And so I was slated to be

the first first lady to give a full presidential radio address, and I was to tape it on

November 15, the same day that Vladimir Putin and Lyudmila Putina would be leaving

our Crawford ranch after their upcoming visit.

The Putins were arriving in Washington, D.C., on the morning of November 13,

the day that the U.S. ally, the Afghan Northern Alliance, captured Kabul as Taliban

fighters fled in pickup trucks. George and President Putin were scheduled to have a

working lunch in the White House's old Family Dining Room, on the first floor. I was

hosting Lyudmila for a smaller lunch in the second-floor dining room. After lunch, we

left for Andrews Air Force Base and Texas. The Putins would join us at the ranch the

following afternoon after a stop in Houston.

My staff, Cathy Fenton, our social secretary, and I had arranged the decorations.

Outside, we had strung lights through the branches of the old live oaks, and in the

dogtrot, we'd arranged round tables with orange cloths and pumpkin and hydrangea

centerpieces. Tom Perini and his team would be barbecuing out of the backs of old-time

covered chuckwagons. Everything was ready by noon. The Putins were scheduled to land

at the ranch at 3:05 p.m. By one o'clock, it was raining; two hours later, the Putins got off

Marine One in the middle of a thunderstorm. Our ranch is in one of the most arid parts of

the country, and it rained almost the entire visit. George spent forty-five minutes driving

President Putin around the ranch in our pickup truck, and fortunately they never got stuck

in the mud. Rain blew through the screens to our porch, where we were to have cocktails

before dinner. The staff was frantically moving tables and hunting for umbrellas minutes

before we had to start greeting the guests. The cowboys cooked in the rain, and the

cowboy band the Ranchhands played on the covered porch. The Putins walked from the

guesthouse in the downpour.

We started the meal with fried catfish and corn bread and then mesquite-grilled

beef tenderloin, plus a birthday cake for Condi Rice. I had invited twenty people, all of

whom we thought a Russian head of state might be interested in meeting, including ranch

owners, athletes, and our friend the pianist Van Cliburn, who was the first person to win

the prestigious International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1958, at the height of the Cold

War. He gave a toast to Putin in Russian. I seated the Russian president next to Alice

Carrington, one of the heirs to the famous King Ranch in Texas. The Putins thought we

had a large ranch at 1,600 acres. Then President Putin asked Alice how big the King

Ranch is, and she told him 825,000 acres. The funniest part for me, after all my protocol

briefings and binders, was that in Texas it's considered a real faux pas to ask someone

how big their ranch is. But it was a perfectly natural question for the head of state of the

largest nation in the world.

Jenna came up from Austin. She speaks Spanish, and I sat her next to Lyudmila

Putina, who does not speak English but does speak Spanish.

The rain finally abated during dinner, and afterward, we walked outside to have

coffee around a crackling bonfire. Vladimir Putin struck up a conversation with Don

Evans, the commerce secretary, over the fire pit. Putin said, "You have such a short

history. You only have two hundred years of history and look how far you have come.

How have you done it?" We forget that Russian history dates back well over a thousand

years, with centuries of czars and dynasties. Donnie looked at him and said the answer is

simple, freedom, democracy. "Here in the U.S.," he added, "people are free to run their

own lives."

To us, it was a very simple statement of the fundamentals of American life, but

George and I and the rest of the administration were never under any illusions about how

hard a concept that is for the most powerful in Russia to grasp.

For the remaining seven years, whenever George was scheduled to meet with

Vladimir Putin, leaders from around the world would start calling the White House weeks

in advance. First it would be the Baltic countries, then the Balkan ones. Nation after

nation wanted George to deliver messages for them. Even Tony Blair would call and say,

"You've got to tell this to Vladimir." George would go to the meeting with a string of

messages from others. And he would have a few of his own as well.

Both here and in Russia, he repeatedly chided Putin for cracking down on the

press, telling the Russian president that his country had to have a free press, that a free

press is essential for a democracy. "You need to have an independent press," George

would tell him. And Putin would invariably reply, "Well, you control your press." George

would shake his head and say, "No, Vladimir, I don't. I wish sometimes that I could

control them, but I can't. They are free to say whatever they want. In our country, the

press is free to write terrible things about me, and I can't do anything about it."

But Russia is a country without those traditions, and with no memory of them,

and many in Russia believed that the U.S. government did control our press. In fact,

following a summit meeting, one of the first questions George got from a Russian

newsman essentially was, How can you complain to President Putin about the Russian

press when you fired Dan Rather?

George worked hard to reach out to Putin in spite of the philosophical divide

between them. The next morning at the ranch, the four of us had breakfast and then

headed into Crawford, so the two presidents could make remarks to the press at the local

high school. First-grade students had hung a banner that read "Howdy, Russian President

Putin." Having world leaders visit our private home forged relationships; it helped to

make it possible for George to deliver all those messages to Putin for so many years. And

we quickly discovered that leaders from all over the world wanted to come to Crawford.

When George invited Chinese president Jiang Zemin to "come and visit America,"

President Jiang indicated that George had invited him to be a guest at our ranch. A few

months later, he arrived at our door. We entertained fifteen foreign leaders among the live

oaks and wild grasses of Crawford.

After lunch, the Putins departed, and I walked over to our old green clapboard

house to tape the president's weekly radio address. I had spent hours editing the draft of

the address and going over every nuance with Karen Hughes. I was a little bit nervous,

but I was also proud to be able to say something on behalf of the women of Afghanistan,

who were threatened with having their fingernails pulled out if they wore so much as a

coat of nail polish. I spoke of the Taliban's "degradation" of women and children, forcing

them to live lives of poverty, poor health, and illiteracy. "The plight of women and

children in Afghanistan is a matter of deliberate human cruelty, carried out by those who

seek to intimidate and control. Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in

horror--not only because our hearts break for the women and children in Afghanistan, but

also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the

rest of us." I wanted the address to be strong, because we needed to speak strongly. But I

also wondered if anyone would be listening.

On Sunday, the day after the address aired, I spent the afternoon in Austin with

Jenna, doing all those mother-daughter things that I loved doing with my girls as they

grew, including shopping. We stopped in the cosmetics section at one of the big

department stores, and the women working behind the counter said something I never

expected. They all said, "Thank you so much. Thank you so much for speaking for

Afghan women." I was stunned. And for the first time, I realized the degree to which I

had a unique forum as first lady. People would pay attention to what I said. I had always

known that intellectually, but now I realized it emotionally.

When I had put on the headphones and bent over the microphone to read the

address, I had thought of those Afghan women, weighed down under their burkas, with

nothing more than tiny mesh slits to uncover their eyes, hidden away from the world and

having the world hidden away from them. They were truly powerless. At that moment, it

was not that I found my voice. Instead, it was as if my voice had found me.

"Grand Mama Laura"

Upstairs in the private White House residence.

(Tina Hager/White House photo)

The eighty-one-foot-tall, eight-ton Norway spruce that towered over Rockefeller

Center had arrived on November 9, strapped to a specially designed trailer, with a full

police escort. The tree, donated by the Tornabene family of Wayne, New Jersey, required

a giant crane to hoist it onto a steel platform located just behind the golden statue of

Prometheus, overlooking the plaza's famed ice rink. For days the tree was encased in

scaffolding as twenty-four electricians draped five miles of colored lights, thirty thousand

red, white, and blue bulbs to be wrapped around its limbs and boughs. All that remained

was for the giant evergreen to be lit.

But even Andy Tornabene, who had grown up in Queens and from whose

backyard the tree came, at one point had doubted that New York would light any holiday

tree this year.

As I made my way into the city just after dusk on November 28, I could sense the

security corridor from blocks away, the sky blue NYPD street barricades, the phalanx of

uniformed officers ringing Rockefeller Center, the mass of steel pens to hold back

spectators, and the near total absence of traffic, as the usual sea of yellow cabs and shiny

cars was shunted to far-off cross streets and distant avenues. New York still lived under

an umbrella of fresh alerts; periodically, police and antiterror task forces would surround

Grand Central or Penn Station. There were visibly armed National Guard soldiers

walking through the airports and along the commuter rail platforms. A mournful silence

seemed to reverberate through the city. The people were fewer, the sounds were quieter,

the streets less brilliant and more subdued.

Mayor Giuliani was waiting for me in the holding area, and there we stayed until

given the signal to make our way outside. As I stood alongside New York's fire and

police commissioners, and the performers, all of us cast brief wary glances up at the night

sky. The tree-lighting ceremony was designed to honor the rescue workers and the

victims of the 9-11 attacks, and some of their relatives and friends were there. One

hundred thousand people filled the streets between Fifth and Sixth avenues. They came

for hope; many had tears in their eyes. "America loves New York," I said, adding,

"President Bush and I wish for all Americans a happy holiday season and a New Year

filled with peace." Then, together, at 8:56 p.m., while television cameras beamed the

signal live across the country, Rudy Giuliani and I held our breath ever so slightly and

flipped on the lights. That night, the only sounds we heard in return were the cheers and

applause from the crowd.

Three days before, the United States had suffered its first casualty in Afghanistan.

Johnny Michael Spann was killed during a riot by Taliban prisoners who launched an

attack in the courtyard of a medieval fortress that had been commandeered to serve as a

twenty-first-century jail. On that same day, more than seven hundred Marines set up

camp in the desert south of the remaining Taliban stronghold of Kandahar. The Taliban

leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar, was calling on his forces to "fight to the death."

I had slowly started watching television again. In the first weeks after 9-11, the

television had been a constant drone at night as I waited in the residence for George. For

the most part, the news was a repetition of that initial horror. And we lived with threat

assessments more disturbing than any ever spoken on the air. By October, to try to sleep

at night, I kept the sets turned off. Finally, on November 12, I turned the TV on to catch

up on the news before the Putins arrived. The first images I saw were of a horrible plane

crash in Queens, an Airbus that had accidentally gone down just after takeoff. Two

hundred and sixty passengers died, along with five people on the ground. I stared at the

screen, numb, tears welling in my eyes. It was as if I were being transported back to

September all over again. And I knew that for the families of these dead and the dead

from 9-11, the ache would be harder, the missing greater as the holiday season began.

I had chosen the theme for the White House's Christmas, "Home for the

Holidays," back in the humid heat of summer, when everything was lush and green. Now

that theme had a far greater meaning, for those who had lost loved ones, for those whose

loved ones would be fighting overseas, and for the nation as a whole. One of the White

House trees was decorated with snowflakes from third graders who attended school at the

various military bases scattered around Washington, D.C. Carpenters, plumbers, and

electricians who worked in the White House had built eighteen miniature replicas of

former presidents' homes. Using original floor plans, they re-created John and John

Quincy Adams's Peacefield, Lyndon Johnson's ranch, James Madison's Montpelier,

George Washington's Mount Vernon, Ulysses S. Grant's and Abraham Lincoln's Illinois

homes, and Woodrow Wilson's birthplace in Staunton, Virginia. Our pastry chef, Roland

Mesnier, made a gingerbread house based on the original White House of 1800, before

British troops attacked the city and the house burned practically to the ground. We also

asked the nation's governors to select local artisans to create handmade ornaments

representing a special historic home or structure in each state, using shades of white. We

received cut-paper sculptures, fabric, and leather to adorn the Blue Room tree. One

ornament was a little cotton cloud from which the Twin Towers rose, as if they had been

transported whole to Heaven.

The other trees scattered through the rooms and halls were draped in lights and

frosted with shimmering snow. That season, the White House had the quality of stillness

after a snow. Almost no one was allowed inside to see the decorations. On Monday,

December 3, the threat assessments arriving in the West Wing were so great that George

placed the entire nation on high alert for possible terrorist strikes. The Secret Service

insisted that all public tours be canceled. Some of the guests we invited to White House

Christmas parties turned us down; many were still too afraid to fly or to visit a city where

terrorists had struck. I wore a red dress and walked cameras through the rooms for a

video of the decor.

With the absence of visitors, we worked on expanding the virtual White House,

and in addition to the television special, the White House communications office created

the "Barney Cam," a specially mounted camera that followed Barney and Spot through

the decorated rooms and the grounds. Each year at Christmastime we debuted the footage

for the young patients at Washington's Children's National Medical Center. One of our

press aides, Jeanie Mamo, became an expert at launching bright plastic Christmas balls

around the East Room, which Barney chased, slipping and sliding across the glossy

waxed floors. In subsequent seasons, we developed more elaborate story lines and

included celebrity guests. One Barney Cam video ended with Kitty serenely sitting on my

lap. Unlike our canines, she steadfastly refused to mug for the camera.

On December 10, we hosted the White House's first-ever Hanukkah party, which

I had begun to plan in August. The Jewish Museum in New York lent us a century-old

menorah for the candle lighting, and we had a catered kosher buffet. That holiday season

and all others to come, we took special pride in two sets of parties, one for the Secret

Service and their families--I loved watching year after year as new babies appeared and

children grew older--and our final party of the season, for the residence staff. They were

the ones who showed us every small kindness, who cared for us, who came to serve

under every condition, and we are grateful for their generosity and constant, unflagging

goodwill.

On December 22, when the last holiday party had ended and the last hand had

been shaken, at just before 8:30 in the morning, the Olympic torch arrived at the White

House on its way to the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. We watched the torchbearer,

Elizabeth Anderson Howell, whose husband, Brady, had been killed on 9-11 at the

Pentagon, carry the flame up the Southeast Drive. She handed her torch to George, who

dipped it into the Olympic cauldron, setting it alive with fire. "We pray for peace and

comfort for you and your family," he said, before dipping a second, unlit torch into the

cauldron and handing it ablaze to Eric Jones, a George Washington University student

who, on the morning of 9-11, left campus and headed for the Pentagon. He spent four

days helping with the rescue efforts there before driving to New York to do the same for

ten days at the still burning remains of the World Trade Center. Eric had been among

those to carry the tattered Marine Corps flag out of the Pentagon debris. We watched as

he strode down the drive and off the White House grounds. He and Elizabeth represented

the best of our country.

A few hours later, Richard Reid would attempt to detonate a bomb onboard a

Paris to Miami flight as it raced above the dark waters of the Atlantic. Inside the sole of

his shoe was a sophisticated explosive capable of blowing a hole in the plane's fuselage.

He was lighting a match when a flight attendant caught him and screamed to the

passengers to pass her "water, contact solution, anything you have!" After he had been

subdued, passengers offered up their belts as restraints and a doctor on board injected

Reid with Valium. We remained on high alert as U.S. troops and Afghan forces battled

against enemy fighters in the mountains around Tora Bora, and remnants of the Taliban

found sanctuary in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

And we waited for the coming of 2002. Our official holiday card was a serene still

life depicting a corner of the residence, painted by Adrian Martinez, who had grown up in

poverty in Washington, D.C., and had found refuge in the art of the Smithsonian

museums. Inside, we wrote, "May the New Year bring peace on Earth."

Since early October, the former Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge had been

working in the West Wing as chief of Homeland Security. His office was a tiny,

windowless room with a desk. There was barely enough space for two full-size chairs.

The West Wing had become a nerve center for terror watches, and the December watch

was now extended through the February Winter Olympics. News reports would soon

describe the fighting in Afghanistan as "winding down," as *Time* magazine put it on

February 16. The worry now was other terror cells around the world. And there was still

the unanswered question of what had happened to Osama bin Laden.

Inside the White House, I was stuck in a kind of limbo. We had difficulty

planning events because of the great uncertainty of the security situation. We would plan

cultural or education activities, and just as the invitations were being finalized, the Secret

Service or someone on the West Wing staff would say no. We hosted a salute to gospel

music in February, and a few White House tours resumed, for prescreened student groups

and members of the military and veterans. Otherwise, except for official visitors and the

constant stream of heads of state and their spouses, the entry gates remained locked and

the house quiet.

We did manage to have a formal unveiling of George's finished Oval Office for

the fabric and rug makers and the donors who had helped us redecorate this remarkable

room. There were new drapes and new beige and ivory damask sofas, three in total, in

case someone spilled coffee on one and the staff had to replace it in a hurry. There was a

new pale wool rug, with a sunburst pattern featuring the presidential seal, because George

had wanted the room to say, "An optimistic man works here." Adorning the rounded

room's walls and niches were paintings and bronzes, including a bust of Sir Winston

Churchill loaned to George by the British government. To hang in full view of his desk,

George chose the portraits of his two most revered presidents, George Washington, who

had created the American presidency, and Abraham Lincoln, who had saved it. George

did not hang a portrait of the president he loved the most; that image, of his dad, was, he

said, "imprinted on my heart."

While the Oval Office's windows face toward the iconic monuments of

Washington, for its remaining walls, we selected images of Texas. On the east and north

walls, we hung three paintings by the early Texas artist Julian Onderdonk, a field of

Texas bluebonnets, a prickly pear cactus in bloom, and a scene of the old Alamo and its

plaza, crowded with local women at their stalls, selling hot, red chilies at dusk, all lent by

Texas museums. The fourth painting was a Tom Lea image of the Rio Grande. Tom had

been our friend for years, and in his 2000 convention speech, George had quoted Tom's

words. Tom wrote that he and his wife "live on the east side of the mountain. It is the

sunrise side, not the sunset side. It is the side to see the day that is coming . . . not the side

to see the day that is gone."

"Americans," George added, "live on the sunrise side of the mountain. We are

ready for the day to come."

A fifth painting was loaned by our longtime friend Joey O'Neill, who had

introduced us. Painted by W. H. D. Koerner and entitled *A Charge to Keep,* it shows a

lone horseman charging up a steep and rough trail. Joey's father had given it to Joey and

Jan as a wedding gift. After hearing the famous Charles Wesley hymn "A Charge to Keep

I Have" sung at George's gubernatorial inaugural in 1995, Joey had loaned George the

painting to hang in his Texas governor's office.

George had chosen to use the *Resolute* desk, given to President Rutherford B.

Hayes by Queen Victoria. In May of 1854, the British ship HMS *Resolute* became

trapped in Arctic ice and was abandoned by its captain. An American whaling vessel

found and rescued the ship in 1855, whereupon Congress purchased the *Resolute,* had it

refitted, and returned it to Queen Victoria as a gift of peace. When the ship was

decommissioned in 1879, the queen requested that a desk be fashioned from its timbers

and sent to the American president. Queen Victoria had it inscribed with a plaque, noting

that the piece was "a memorial of the courtesy and loving kindness" of the Americans.

Franklin Roosevelt asked that a panel be added to the desk to hide his wheelchair, but the

panel arrived only after his death. Harry Truman installed it anyway. John F. Kennedy

was the first president to place the desk in the Oval Office, and his toddler son, JFK Jr.,

would play underneath. Later Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton spent their working hours

in the West Wing at the *Resolute* desk.

Facing south and surrounded by windows, the Oval Office is bathed in light even

on cloudy days. The first time Vladimir Putin walked in and saw that brilliant south light

spilling through the windows, he said simply, "My God." The room itself is not palatial,

like the offices of many leaders in other countries. It is a modest, human-size room, and

surprising in its simplicity. The longest point is just over thirty-five feet; at eighteen feet,

the ceiling is barely higher than in the Texas Governor's Mansion. At least once, a foreign

head of state came through and afterward was heard to complain, "I thought I was going

to see the Oval Office." When told that he had, his expression turned incredulous. "But it

is so small."

At the end of January, I finally returned to the Senate to give my education

briefing to Senator Kennedy's committee. It was two weeks after George had signed the

landmark No Child Left Behind Act, which Democrats Ted Kennedy and Rep. George

Miller and Republicans Judd Gregg and Rep. John Boehner had shepherded through

Congress with the help of Education Secretary Rod Paige and George's Domestic Policy

advisor, Margaret Spellings, in the previous session. I thought back to what Ted Kennedy

had written on the daffodil print he had given me that September morning, "To the First

Lady of Education, whose impressive leadership is enabling millions of American

children to dance with the daffodils! Your friend Ted Kennedy Sept. 11, 2001." I was still

able to visit schools and to highlight innovative educational programs, but now we were a

nation at war. When I finally donated my inaugural gown, coat, purse, and shoes to the

Smithsonian's National Museum of American History for its first lady exhibit on January

20, a year to the day since George had been sworn in, it seemed as if that glittery red

dress had been worn by a woman who existed in another era.

Three days later, on January 23, Daniel Pearl, the South Asia bureau chief for *The*

Wall Street Journal, was kidnapped in Karachi, Pakistan. He was investigating ties

between the shoe bomber, Richard Reid, al Qaeda, and Pakistan's Inter-Services

Intelligence.

The kidnappers e-mailed photos of Danny, hunched and holding up a newspaper,

with a gun pointed to his head. They claimed that he was working for the CIA, and they

demanded that Pakistani terror detainees be freed and that the United States ship disputed

F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan's government. For weeks, Danny's wife and American and

Pakistani agents scoured the country searching for him. But it was too late.

On February 1, Danny Pearl's captors had slit his throat and then sliced off his

head. Only on February 21 did we learn the grisly truth. American FBI agents, posing as

journalists, obtained a video in which Danny Pearl confirmed that he was "a Jewish

American." The video continued with a longer list of the captors' demands, and then,

nearly two minutes in, it showed the beheading in full, gruesome detail. The final scene

was of a captor holding up Danny's severed head by its hair. The video ended with the

words "And if our demands are not met, this scene shall be repeated again and again."

The man who would later confess to beheading Daniel Pearl is Khalid Sheikh

Mohammed, who also claims to be the mastermind behind the attacks of 9-11.

Among those whom Danny left behind were his parents, Ruth and Judea, and his

wife, Mariane, who was six months pregnant with their first child.

As we waited for news of Danny Pearl, I invited a couple to the White House who

had lost their son on September 11. Sharon and Kenneth Ambrose's son, Paul, a doctor

with the U.S. Public Health Service, had been on board the flight that crashed into the

Pentagon. I had heard about Paul not long after 9-11 from our longtime Midland friend

Penny Slade-Sawyer, who now worked with the Public Health Service. She said that in

Paul the service had lost one of its brightest stars. But it was the message from his parents

that truly broke my heart. In clusters of suburbs across New York, New Jersey,

Connecticut, Massachusetts, and around Washington, D.C., there were hundreds of

families devastated by grief. But in some small measure of comfort, they were not alone.

The Ambroses were the only family in all of West Virginia who had lost someone in the

horror of 9-11. In their particular grief, they knew no one else who could truly

understand. On February 7, the Ambroses came to the White House. Over coffee we sat

and talked about Paul, about his life and his dreams. I listened to their words of love and

loss. They had already suffered the death of another son. Paul was their one remaining

child. Long after they left, I thought about them and that depth of sadness. And I thought

of all the parents who now wondered what could happen to their children when they did

something as routine as board a plane.

I turned to books for comfort. The quietest part of my day was always late

afternoon, when my official schedule was finished but George was still at work in the

Oval Office. I no longer ran errands, the way I had in Texas. In Dallas, by four o'clock I

would have been pushing my cart around the supermarket aisle, trying to come up with

something to fix for dinner. I would be waiting for the girls to return; I would be rushing

to pick something up at the dry cleaners, or driving car pool, or taking Barbara and Jenna

to a lesson or an activity. In Austin, when the girls were in high school, I would go to a

game or a practice or be around to make sure that they did their homework. Every

moment would be accounted for until bedtime, when I could finally take a breath. Now,

those pre-evening hours had become the emptiest.

I thought about Nancy Reagan, lying down late one afternoon to rest after breast

cancer surgery and learning that her mother had died. Ronald Reagan opened the door

and told her; he had gotten the word first.

Day after day, as the afternoon waned and darkness settled over Washington,

D.C., I would read, newer works, such as Leif Enger's *Peace Like a River;* histories, such

as Jay Winik's *April 1865;* or classics, such as Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the*

Archbishop, just as my mother had done all those years ago in Midland when I would

come home and find her with a book in her hands. I read as I waited for George to arrive

for dinner, and I was grateful to have words to keep me company.

I looked too for ways to bring words and writers into the White House, hosting

symposiums on authors such as Mark Twain or on schools of literature, including the

Harlem Renaissance. We gathered literary figures and scholars in the East Room and

invited students and teachers from local schools. It was a chance to discuss some of the

most powerful works in the American past and the writers who speak to all of us through

the humanity of their characters. Our guest lists were limited, but we made sure the

events were televised around the nation via C-SPAN.

And I looked for ways to help the women and children of Afghanistan.

At the time, there were 10 million children in Afghanistan; one in three was an

orphan; one in four would not live to see a fifth birthday, and more Afghan mothers died

in childbirth than mothers in almost any other part of the world. On October 12, 2001,

George had announced the creation of America's Fund for Afghan Children. He asked

children across the United States to donate one dollar to help the children of Afghanistan.

The response was overwhelming. In less than four years, the program would raise more

than $11 million. Thousands of those donations were sadly "lost" for years in the bags of

potentially anthrax-contaminated White House mail.

By early December, though, the fund was sending humanitarian aid. The world is

full of suffering peoples and nations, but in the harsh, remote hills and plains of

Afghanistan, the deprivation has been particularly cruel. Afghanistan was a place where

children came of age barefoot and where many of them could not imagine something as

simple as a bright, soft plastic ball. In a Red Cross warehouse in New Windsor,

Maryland, George and I saw the first-aid pallets. Bundled together were winter coats and

tents and ten thousand individual gift parcels, which included wool socks, knit hats, soap,

pencils, paper, and inflatable balls. FedEx had offered to ship the packages free of charge

to Germany, where they would be loaded onto U.S. military transport planes, flown to

Turkmenistan, and then trucked across the border into Northern Afghanistan. The

formidable logistics were a reminder of how isolated this region and its people are.

On December 12, at a special ceremony at the National Museum of Women in the

Arts, where I had once loved to stroll through exhibitions with Bar, George signed into

law the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001 to provide health and education

assistance to women and children in Afghanistan. One woman in attendance was known

only as Farida. She had come to the United States as a refugee in 2000. She was a former

aid worker who had tried to promote basic human rights for women. Even with the

Taliban being driven from power, she was afraid to use her full name.

I had already seen that wary-eyed fear firsthand in late November of 2001, when I

hosted a group of Afghan women for coffee.

Melanne Verveer, Hillary Clinton's White House chief of staff and now head of

the organization Vital Voices, had phoned Andi Ball, my chief of staff, to say that eleven

Afghan exiles, some living in the United States, some living overseas, were arriving in

Washington. Would I consider meeting with them? I immediately said yes and invited

them to the White House. I still remember the women's amazement at being welcomed

into the home of presidents. Inside Afghanistan, under the Taliban, they had been banned

from almost all government buildings and public places. We gathered in the Diplomatic

Reception Room, which until Teddy Roosevelt's time had housed the White House's

massive coal furnace. During the Depression and World War II, it would become the

iconic scene of Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats. Jackie Kennedy had installed the

room's fanciful French wallpaper, printed in 1834, depicting scenes from early America,

including Niagara Falls and Boston Harbor. I watched the women's eyes move across the

walls, taking everything in.

In speaking to reporters, I said that I hoped "one principle of that new government

will be human rights, and that includes the rights of women and children." And I hoped

that the new Afghan government, then being formed at a special gathering of Afghan

nationals and exiles in Bonn, Germany, would "include everyone." I wanted women to

have seats at the table and every Afghan child, girls as well as boys, to be offered an

education.

Most of these women had served as aid workers, trying to improve life for the

millions of others left behind. One, Mary Chopan Alamshahi, a nurse-practitioner who

now lived in exile in California, thanked me for "giving voice to us" in the November 17

presidential radio address. "The entire world listened," she said, as her words caught with

emotion.

Not everyone was quite so willing to let my voice be my own. Writing in

Newsweek after the White House event, reporter Martha Brant said, "If I had closed my

eyes, I could have sworn it was Hillary Clinton talking."

On January 28, Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's new interim leader, came to

Washington to meet with George at the White House. Before he left, I gave him an

inscribed children's English dictionary, to emphasize the importance of education.

On March 8, I was at the United Nations in New York for International Women's

Day. The UN's glass tower rises like a glittery monument to postwar optimism. But

inside, it is old. The once state-of-the-art linoleum floors are worn with age, the back

hallways drab and industrial. The escalators that cart people between floors look like

relics from another era; ironically, the Pentagon has similar metal escalators linking its

floors. Newer, high-gloss models can be found in almost any shopping mall.

As I walked beneath the flags of the member nations, I hoped that today's UN

would not forget Afghanistan's women and children. Hamid Karzai had already signed a

Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women, legally granting women equality

with men. But a sizable gap remained between paper pledges and people's lives.

Everyone knew it would take years to undo the damage wrought by the vicious gender

apartheid of the Taliban.

The morning began with a simple coffee in one of the building's reception rooms,

with stunning views of New York's East River. Nane Annan, wife of UN SecretaryGeneral Kofi Annan, orchestrated an impromptu receiving line; I

stood and smiled

alongside international luminaries, including Jordan's Queen Noor. Then it was on to the

conference, with six hundred attendees. My chair was marked as the lead seat of the U.S.

delegation. Not until that moment did I realize that I was, on that morning, representing

my country at the United Nations.

I spoke of the U.S. government's commitment to aiding the people of Afghanistan

and the more than $4 million donated so far by American children to help the children of

Afghanistan. American aid workers were doggedly helping Afghan refugees return home

and helping the country's widows, devastated after twenty-three years of fighting, support

their families. Some of our contributions were bags of wheat for the twenty-one womenowned bakeries in Kabul. Those bakeries fed over one-quarter of the city's population. I

spoke too of helping to educate the children of Afghanistan. "When you give children

books and an education, you give them the ability to imagine a future of opportunity,

equality, and justice," I said. My favorite line in the speech was a quotation from

Farahnaz Nazir, the founder of the Afghanistan Women's Association, who said, "Society

is like a bird. It has two wings. And a bird cannot fly if one wing is broken."

We would help bind that broken wing.

My next stop was P.S. 234, the school in lower Manhattan where children had

witnessed the horror of the attacks on the Twin Towers from just four blocks away. I had

first met many of the students and teachers at the end of September, when they were

crowded inside another school, P.S. 41. The students had returned to their original

building in early February, once the smoldering fires had finally been extinguished and

the worst of the air pollution had cleared. School officials conservatively estimated that at

least 5 percent of the students were still suffering from severe emotional trauma. The

number was probably far higher. Many children were terrified of getting on an airplane or

riding the subway. Low-flying helicopters and planes or sudden loud noises would leave

them shaken and in tears. I listened to these ten-and eleven-year-olds and thought of

them, like me, still anxiously scanning the skies.

On March 23, school was set to resume in Afghanistan. For most girls, after

nearly eight years of Taliban rule, it would be their first time in a classroom. The Red

Cross had already shipped more than one thousand school kits, with supplies for forty

thousand children, to Kabul to be distributed on opening day. George and I helped

assemble more kits alongside students at Samuel W. Tucker Elementary School in

Alexandria, Virginia. But that was only the beginning of the needs. Children, especially

girls, were in dire need of school uniforms; those who attended school in ordinary street

or house clothes often felt shame. Most Afghans, though, had little more than a needle or

thread to sew. Working with Vital Voices, we shipped several thousand manual sewing

machines across the Pakistani border--the old foot-pedal style that my grandmother had

used, since much of the country lacked any form of electricity. And we sent fabric, yards

and yards, enough to outfit 3 million children. The Liz Claiborne company alone donated

a half million yards of material. For the barefoot, we received shoes from Bass, New

Balance, Sebago, and Timberland. The Sara Lee Corporation paid for socks. L.L.Bean

donated shoes, jackets, and blankets. Walmart and General Motors gave money to help

offset costs. It was, for me, a moment of real pride to see the generosity of these

companies and their employees to people in a place half a world away, a place that had

given refuge to the plotters of the worst civilian attack in our history.

And other companies came forward to meet other needs. When I met with Afghan

judges who told me that they could not even type court records, that every court

document had to be laboriously copied by hand, I asked my office to approach the Dell

Computer Corporation and Microsoft. The two companies donated computers, software,

and printers to bring a bit of modernity to Afghanistan's judicial system. Time and again,

Americans from all walks of life gave, and they did so with open hearts.

In New York and Washington, the scars from the previous fall were slower to

heal. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his wife, Joyce, spent many hours

helping the families of those killed and wounded in the attacks of 9-11. They followed

the progress of the burn victims, helped when other concerns arose, and did not forget to

be encouraging. When plans began for a memorial on the Pentagon grounds to honor

those who had perished that September morning, Don and Joyce quietly became one of

the memorial's largest donors. Another couple who generously gave were Sharon and

Kenneth Ambrose, whose son, Paul, the public health doctor, had been on board the

hijacked plane. In the months that followed, I wrote to them several times and told them

that they remained in my prayers.

That spring, Cherie Blair got her wish, a visit to our ranch in Crawford. She and

Tony came in early April with her mother and their two youngest children, as the final

stop on a holiday for her family in the United States. That was one of the remarkable

things to me about other national leaders and their spouses, the freedom they have to go

on holidays, often abroad. Presidents of the United States must get away inside one

compound or another, whether it is a rented retreat on Martha's Vineyard, as the Clintons

had chosen, or the privacy of their own homes, Crawford for me and George,

Kennebunkport for Gampy and Bar, or their California ranch for Ronald and Nancy

Reagan.

At our ranch, after dinner, Tony Blair borrowed a guitar and strummed and sang

along with the San Antonio band Daddy Rabbit. During the day, we braved a pouring

rain to drive across the rugged grounds in George's pickup. Most of all, we enjoyed each

other's company. During our final lunch, George and Cherie managed to have another of

their good-natured back-and-forths. This time, she was urging him to agree to make the

United States a participant in the newly created International Criminal Court, designed to

prosecute genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. (The United States, India,

China, and Indonesia are among the nations that have not ratified it, citing concerns about

sovereignty.) George ran down the driveway as Tony and Cherie were driving off to get

in the last word. He joked that Cherie's persistence must have been the reason Bill

Clinton had considered signing the document in the first place. But for George and Tony,

these couple of days at Crawford had been deeply serious. With the Taliban for now

beaten back in Afghanistan, they were looking toward the threat from another country,

Iraq, where American and British intelligence, and indeed nearly every intelligence

agency in Europe, told them that Saddam Hussein was sitting on a massive stockpile of

weapons of mass destruction.

The Blairs departed for London, and so did I, for the funeral of the Queen Mother,

who had died just before their visit. I was designated to lead the U.S. delegation, which

included the prominent Texas ranch owners Anne and Tobin Armstrong. Anne had been

ambassador to the British Court of St. James's under Gerald Ford. The world bade the

Queen Mother farewell beneath the glorious Gothic arches and stained glass of

Westminster Abbey. Cars had been banned from the nearby streets; there was only the

clop of horses' hooves, pipers playing haunting notes, and the thump of the funeral drum.

It was a scene from another time and place, from a century so very far from our own.

When I returned to Washington, my first meeting was about the Christmas

holidays. At the White House, Christmas preparations begin in April, from choosing an

artist for the card to planning the themes and events. It takes over half a year to organize

the three weeks in December during which George and I would often host two events in a

single evening and shake well over nine thousand hands.

But even as we planned, we did not know what the future would hold. On April

25, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia came to Crawford to meet with George. I

had overseen plans for the lunch. "No pork products, no flesh of scavenger animals,

birds, or fish, including shellfish," advised Don Ensenat, Chief of Protocol. "All meat

should be cooked until well-done." So we served barbecued beef ribs, and I made myself

scarce on other parts of the ranch after the arrival ceremony. Women did not travel with

the crown prince. Condi Rice, our national security advisor, would be the sole woman in

attendance. Those were the customs in the prince's part of the world.

I was also preparing for my own trip, fifteen days through Europe, starting in

Paris with a speech to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's

2002 Global Forum on Education. Jenna was coming with me. Four days before we left,

in Kaspiysk, part of Russia's Dagestan republic, land mines placed by the side of the road

had exploded, killing forty-three civilians, seventeen of them children who had gathered

to watch a parade in remembrance of World War II. The bombers were Chechen

terrorists. I tore up much of my prepared speech as we flew over the Atlantic. Instead of

the expected lines about the importance of education, I called on parents and teachers to

teach their children to respect all human life, and I told the world that it needed to

condemn bombings like that in Dagestan, and other recent ones in Pakistan and Israel.

"Every parent, every teacher, every leader has a responsibility to condemn the terrible

tragedy of children blowing themselves up to kill others." I added that "prosperity cannot

follow peace without educated women and children." It is a simple idea, but it lies at the

heart of so much suffering in the world. And I was reminded of exactly what ignorance

breeds during the balance of my days in Paris.

The following morning I toured the Guimet Museum's exhibition "One Thousand

Years of Afghan Art." The museum's curators had begun the exhibition months before 911, when the Taliban leader Mullah Omar ordered the destruction of the two giant

Bamiyan Buddhas that had been carved into majestic sandstone cliffs less than 150 miles

northwest of Kabul, in a valley region of central Afghanistan that lay at a crossroads of

east-west trade routes along the once-fabled Silk Road. The Bamiyan Buddhas were

shockingly dynamited in February of 2001, after inhabiting their niches for almost fifteen

hundred years. They had been the largest examples of standing Buddha carvings in the

world and had been designated by UNESCO, the United Nation's Educational, Scientific,

and Cultural Organization, as a World Heritage site. Now they lay in a pile of rubble.

At the Paris museum, curators had meticulously created replicas of these ancient

statues. Displayed alongside were other priceless artifacts from Afghan history, which

had been lent from museums and private holdings across Europe. I gazed upon intricate

bronze buckets from the year 700, the dawn of the nation's Muslim era, as well as

delicate ivory figures and a carved foot of Zeus, all that remained of a statue

painstakingly sculpted in the third century b.c. Daring Afghan curators had rescued some

of the rarest objects, smuggling them out of the country in the backs of trucks or on

horseback after the Taliban looted Kabul's art museum in the mid-1990s. Gazing around

the rooms, I wondered about a regime so determined to destroy everything of beauty

from its nation's past and about the Taliban's deep hatred of any culture outside its own.

I made another stop in Paris, one so private that it was not listed on my official

schedule. Without the press or most of the staff, Jenna and I made our way to the small

flat where Mariane Pearl, Danny Pearl's widow, was staying. It was a modest place, with

a bit of a student feel, reminding me for a minute of my little walk-up all those years ago

in Austin.

Mariane was less than two weeks away from giving birth to their son, and what

should have been a buoyant, slightly anxious time was instead framed with sadness.

There would be no father for Adam, no husband beside Mariane. I thought of the

pregnant wives of the firemen and other victims on 9-11, how some had asked their lost

husbands' brothers or friends to be with them at their baby's birth. But Mariane was alone.

We talked. I asked her about her experiences and what we might learn, and I told her that

she would be welcome in the United States if she chose to come. I thought that in a city

like New York there would be others who might comprehend her unique pain.

On May 16, as I left Paris, Danny's body was found on the outskirts of Karachi. A

week later, the day before her son was born, Mariane received an e-mail that had been

intended for another recipient. In its mechanically spaced electronic letters, the terse

dispatch described how, after his throat had been slit and he had been beheaded, Danny's

body was cut into ten parts, then dumped in a shallow grave.

When Adam Pearl was born, both George and Jacques Chirac called Mariane with

good wishes. Her heart, she later said, was so heavy that she could barely speak.

From Paris I flew to Budapest, where the focus of my stop was women and

disease. In my first few hours on the ground, I met with Hungary's president and first

lady, Ferenc and Dalma M'dl, and Prime Minister Viktor Orb'n, lunched with women

leaders, many of whom were struggling to establish themselves in their nation's

traditionally patriarchical society, and at night attended the opera *Madame Butterfly,*

sitting in the gold-trimmed president's box. The opera was in Italian, the subtitles were in

Hungarian, and my exhausted staff fell asleep.

The American ambassador to Hungary was my good friend from Dallas, Nancy

Brinker, who had become a breast cancer activist after her sister, Susan Komen, died at

age thirty-six from the disease. Hungary has the fourth highest death rate from breast

cancer in Eastern Europe, and Nancy made it her personal mission to improve cancer

screening rates and care for women. Together we visited an oncology clinic where the

nurses in their starched white caps reminded me of my childhood Cherry Ames books. I

spoke with and tried to comfort women who were days away from major cancer surgery

and who were terrified. By October of 2002, Nancy had convinced the reluctant

Hungarian government to put aside its fear that pink was the color of homosexuality.

Pink ribbons for breast cancer awareness began to appear, and the Hungarians lit bridges

linking the city halves of Buda and Pest a bright, rich pink.

My next stop was Prague, where I met V'clav Havel and his wife, Dagmar

Havlov'. I had long admired Havel, a gifted intellectual and playwright who had spent

years as a political prisoner under the Communists. Both V'clav and Dagmar are funny

and charming and wise. They showed me around the famous Prague Castle, the official

presidential home, and later hosted me in their modest residence; they had no desire to

live in the splendor of a castle. Being elected to the presidency of a nation that in a

previous era had jailed him was, V'clav said quite simply, "a gift of fate."

I joined Craig Stapleton, our ambassador to the Czech Republic--Debbie, his wife,

is George's cousin and one of my close friends--for the ceremony marking the fiftyseventh anniversary of the liberation of the Terezin (or Theresienstadt) concentration

camp. Just a year before, I had gazed upon the drawings made by children at the camp,

images of flowers and of loaves of bread carried on hearses, displayed in simple frames

on a wall of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Nearly every child at

Terezin died; only these pictures, hidden away, had survived.

As I laid flowers on the mass grave of ten thousand victims, I thought of my

father and his fellow soldiers who had overseen the burial of some five thousand dead at

Nordhausen in April of 1945. All those souls, now resting beneath grass and stones.

On Tuesday, May 21, I was slated to give a radio address directly to the people of

Afghanistan from the studios of the U.S. government's Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty,

which now broadcast into Afghanistan, Iran, and many of the former Soviet republics

from the old Czech parliament building. The name was a bit of a misnomer; there was

nothing parliamentary about it. Instead, it was the place where Czechoslovakia's former

Communist leadership had met. Sandwiched amid Prague's bright Rococo architecture,

the old parliament building is gray, angular, and unadorned, a perfect example of Stalinist

construction. Now, in a touch of irony, it housed America's primary means of speaking to

the people of Afghanistan. At Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's headquarters, my

morning's events also included a media roundtable for the press.

But when my staff and I awoke, the Secret Service told us to cancel the address

and the roundtable. They had received a specific threat.

The Secret Service is a remarkable institution. Its men and women are willing to

risk their lives to guard the president's. They wait in broiling sun and subzero cold; their

mission is to protect the first family from harm. My closest agents--Ron Sprinkle, Wayne

Williams, Leon Newsome, Ignacio Zamora, and Karen Shugart, all of whom headed my

detail--became like family. From the start, George and I made it a policy never to travel

on Christmas, so that as many agents as possible could spend the holidays with their

families. We knew they gave so very much.

We did not dismiss the risk, but I very much wanted to give the address. Finally,

we arrived at a compromise. The agents sent out a dummy motorcade from my hotel. I

departed later and was hustled into the parliament building via a rear loading dock, and

from there, straight to the sound booth. My words were translated into the Afghan

languages of Pashto and Dari. I spoke about the school kits being created, about the

American children who had enthusiastically donated money to the children of

Afghanistan, and about the educational, medical, food, and other humanitarian aid the

United States was sending. The entire time, a helicopter hovered overhead.

I gave the address, and the threat never materialized.

But there was a constant stream of threats, and they seemed to increase in the

following months.

After an overnight in Berlin, I met George and we traveled to Russia, first to

Moscow, the sprawling city on the plain with the fortified Kremlin sitting high above,

and then to St. Petersburg, with its western canals, ornate palaces, and czarist heritage.

While George and Vladimir Putin signed a nuclear arms reduction treaty, I read *Make*

Way for Ducklings to Russian children at the State Children's Library. They all laughed

when they heard the names "Jack, Kack, Lack, Mack, Nack, Ouack, Pack, and Quack." In

St. Petersburg, the Putins put grand Russian culture on display. We saw the sprawling

Winter Palace, the place where Czarina Catherine had once ordered a soldier to stand

guard over the first snowdrop of spring. At the Hermitage, we glimpsed bits of the art that

the czars had collected and other pieces later confiscated from the nobility by the

revolutionaries. We saw only a small fraction of what is stored within those walls. There

are over 3 million objects in the Hermitage Museum and Winter Palace; their corridors

alone stretch for nearly fourteen miles. If we spent just one minute looking at each work

of art, it would take eleven years.

By late May, St. Petersburg is light late into the night. Sundown is just before

11:00 p.m. At 9:15, the sky was still ablaze as we boarded a boat to cruise with the Putins

along the Neva River. We dined on caviar as the sun slipped toward the western horizon

on one side and the moon rose in the east. George looked at me and said, "Bushie, you

are in Heaven." The translator immediately repeated it to the Putins, who gasped with

pleasure.

We said good night after a barrage of fireworks.

The next morning, we toured the Kazan Cathedral, Russia's adaptation of the

Basilica of St. Peter's in Rome and a monument to the Russian defeat of Napoleon in

1812, when captured French banners were placed in the cathedral. Inside the main

basilica, there were no chairs. Worshipers stand as priests in long, flowing robes chant

the liturgy. Under the Communists, the Kazan Cathedral had housed a museum of

"History of Religion and Atheism." The museum remains, but the word "atheism" has

been scrubbed away. From there, we made our way to the Grand Choral Synagogue, the

second largest synagogue in all of Europe. It was built in the 1880s, with a special permit

from the czar. Only select Jews, those with specific trades or advanced degrees, or those

who had served in the military, were allowed to reside in St. Petersburg, and the

synagogue's builders were told that they could not construct their place of worship near

any churches or within view of any roads ever traveled by the czars.

The Putins hosted a farewell tea for us at the Russian Museum. George walked

into the room where elegant tables were laden with trays of pastries and coffee samovars

had been meticulously arranged. He turned to Vladimir and asked, "Are we going to eat

this food or just look at it?" The Russian leader answered, with a twinkle in his eye, "This

is a museum." Everyone in the room burst out laughing.

I did not go with George to the G8 Summit in June. It was held atop a mountain

outside of Calgary, Canada, enveloped in a security bubble so tight that spouses were not

invited. In Washington, my Secret Service detail would no longer allow me to go for a

walk outside the White House grounds, which I had done early on some mornings.

Camouflaged in a baseball cap and sunglasses, I would traverse the gravel paths crossing

the National Mall or the canal in Georgetown. But now I was to walk on White House

grounds. It was ironic that as we hosted an official event in honor of the two hundredth

anniversary of the great western explorers Lewis and Clark, my own physical space was

shrinking.

Amid the uncertainty, we treasured the simplicity of our family life. For the girls'

twentieth birthday the previous November, we had suggested that they invite twenty

friends to Camp David for the weekend. George devised contests for the guests, including

tennis, basketball, and bowling for the boys, and we put a karaoke machine in the main

lodge so the kids would have fun activities all weekend. The girls stayed with us for

holidays, breaks, and even some weekends, and I talked to my daughters on the phone

almost every other day when I was home. On foreign trips, when they could accompany

me, I found them to be wonderful companions. I looked forward to long flights and the

hours of transatlantic mother-daughter time, chatting about friends and boyfriends, and

whatever they found interesting. Echoing my path, Jenna was studying English and

writing at Texas, while Barbara had chosen humanities at Yale.

In our own lives, George remained the biggest homebody known to man. When

either one of us traveled around the country, we always tried to make it a day trip, flying

out at the crack of dawn and returning home in time to eat dinner side by side. Except for

solo visits overseas, we seldom spent a night apart. Many evenings we had quiet dinners,

just the two of us, in the residence. We spoke about our daughters, about baseball in the

summer, about family, and about friends.

But these respites could be measured in minutes; they never lasted long. There

was, I realize now, a constant low-level anxiety that enveloped us each day in the White

House after 9-11. We were always on watch for the next thing that might be coming. It

was far more than simply scanning the skies; it was the threat reports, not merely from

countries like Afghanistan or Iraq or Iran but from Yemen or North Korea or Somalia. It

was earthquakes, tornadoes, or hurricanes. It was the constant knowledge that, in the span

of thirty minutes or an hour, the world could change.

The pace inside the White House was brutal, not simply that year but for the

entirety of George's two terms. George would arrive in the Oval Office by 6:30 or 7:00

every morning; his immediate staff came in by 6:00 a.m.; his chief of staff, Andy Card,

was often in by 5:00 a.m., and everyone worked deep into the evening.

I remember vividly during 2002, when we would go to Camp David on the

weekends, Condi Rice and Andy Card and his wife, Kathleene, would come along.

Cabinet members frequently joined us as well. Condi and Andy would work the entire

time, taking phone calls, reading papers, briefing George. Condi and I used to joke about

her "inadvertent nap," the one she took when she was sitting on the couch to work and,

from sheer exhaustion, fell asleep. Since the late 1990s, Condi had become like family.

She traveled with us, joined us for dinner, and whenever she was in the room, her lively

mind and sparkle were on full display. We are fortunate to have had not only her advice

but her friendship.

At Camp, our Navy mess chefs became experts at comfort food, like fried chicken

and chicken-fried steak, which we seldom had at the White House. Sometimes, early in

the morning, Condi, Kathleene, and I would walk the two-mile perimeter trail with the

steep hill at the end that we nicknamed Big Bertha. But even when we talked, in some

corner, all of our minds were still working. There was no letting go.

In the late spring and early summer I attended the groundbreaking for the

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, and a preservation

event for Louisa May Alcott's home in Concord, Massachusetts. I addressed an Early

Learning Summit in Boise, Idaho, the third regional conference my office had helped to

initiate after last summer's Early Childhood Summit, and I discussed the need to educate

parents on creative ways for them to be their children's first teachers. I dedicated the

Katherine Anne Porter home in Kyle, Texas, as a National Literary Landmark. At the

White House, I had already hosted a conference on school libraries; now we were

addressing character and community, gathering major leaders from character education

programs across the nation to discuss what was working and what wasn't. Part of the

conference focused on the increasing prevalence of service learning programs, in which

students perform outside community service, often as a graduation requirement. Secretary

of State Colin Powell gave the keynote address. But that entire summer it felt as if we

were waiting, wondering where the next danger might lie, and whether the international

community could persuade Saddam Hussein to disarm.

On July 17, Poland's president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, and his wife, Jolanta,

came to Washington for an official state visit. George and I had visited Poland the

previous summer, and in one of my albums, I had a collection of photographs from the

U.S. Embassy in Warsaw taken several days after 9-11. The entrance overflowed with

flowers and notes that read, "We are with you." "We are all American."

In the wake of 9-11, President Kwasniewski had helped mobilize central, eastern,

and southeastern Europe to respond more aggressively to international terrorism and

pursue terrorists. Although George had held more than fifty meetings with heads of state

from around the world in the last eighteen months, this was just our second state dinner,

and our first since September 11. State visits are precision displays, with everything

organized down to the minute, and the protocol is almost as tradition-bound as the

ceremonial opening of Parliament by the British monarch. That morning we hosted a

formal arrival ceremony for the Kwasniewskis with four thousand guests on the South

Lawn.

As the final bars of the fanfare music, "Ruffles and Flourishes," sounded from

trumpets on the Truman Balcony, George and I stepped into a small alcove outside the

Diplomatic Reception Room. We stood there, completely still, barricaded behind two

very tall, fully dressed Marine Guards until "Hail to the Chief" commenced. Then the

guards parted and we began the walk down the red carpet to await our guests, who at that

same moment were motoring up in their limousine. Military bands played the two

national anthems; there was a twenty-one-gun salute, and the Revolutionary War-era Fife

and Drum Corps marched past, playing "Yankee Doodle Dandy." Together George and

Aleksander walked forward to review the U.S. troops representing all the military

services, standing at attention in perfect formation. Afterward, both presidents spoke. At

the conclusion we walked up the South Portico steps to the balcony and turned for a final

wave before entering the Blue Room for an official receiving line. The two presidents

departed to confer in the Oval Office; Jolanta and I retired to the Green Room for coffee.

Between the arrival ceremony and the dinner preview for the press, and before the dinner

itself, I slipped off to the National Cathedral for the memorial service for J. Carter

Brown, the longtime director of the National Gallery of Art.

The evening was every bit as ceremonial as the arrival; there was another official

greeting, and full-dress members of the Joint Service Color Guard, representing the

military services, the Army, Navy, and the Marines--a fourth member is from either the

Air Force or the Coast Guard, which alternate events--led us in a formal procession down

the grand staircase and to the East Room to greet our guests. After the receiving line, we

proceeded to the State Dining Room for the official toasts and dinner. The largest change

in state dinner protocol in recent decades had come forty years before, when Jackie

Kennedy traded in the traditional long, horseshoe-shaped table for round ones. For the

Kwasniewskis, the tables were decorated with red and white roses and daisies, in honor

of the Polish flag. I had once heard the horrible tale of an official dinner where the flower

arrangements had been in the colors of the guest nation's mortal enemy, and I was always

deeply conscious of the flowers we chose. For the place settings, I had selected Nancy

Reagan's red china and reproductions of Jackie Kennedy's West Virginia crystal; no one

is able to use Jackie's original pieces, because too few remain. The glasses have been

broken and chipped over the years; multiple glasses are lost at every party held, and the

West Virginia glass blowers that once made them have long since shuttered their doors.

Most crystal is now manufactured overseas. Fortunately, Lenox copied the Kennedy

pattern, and it has continued to provide the White House with reproductions of Jackie

Kennedy's glassware.

China dinner services are almost as much of a challenge. The earliest presidents

brought their own porcelain sets, usually made in France or England, and dutifully crated

up the pieces and carried them back home when they left office. There are a few scattered

plates and teacups remaining in the White House collection, and we did host small

dinners in the upstairs residence with plates from the Truman and Eisenhower

administrations and Lady Bird Johnson's lovely wildflower pieces. But only the most

recent china services, Nancy Reagan's famous red and Hillary Clinton's pale yellow, have

enough pieces to be used for a state dinner. Every dinner takes a small toll on the china

collections. Before Hillary Clinton ordered her pale yellow pattern, she asked Lenox to

rerun pieces from some older china services to fill in the gaps from near constant

breakage and chipping. Using privately raised funds from the nonprofit White House

Historical Association, I added another china service near the end of George's second

term. Manufactured by Lenox, its green lattice design is based on the few pieces of James

and Dolley Madison's china in the White House collection. I ordered 320 place settings,

but the pieces arrived in small batches, and we never had the chance to host a full dinner

with them.

Three months of planning and preparation had gone into this dinner, but I had not

planned on Jolanta wearing a long dress with a gauzy silk train. When we were walking

into the State Dining Room, she stopped short. I stopped behind her, with an entire line of

guests awkwardly pausing behind me. In a whisper I urged her forward, but she did not

move. I spoke again, and at last she murmured, "I can't. You are standing on my dress."

After the high precision and gloss of the state dinner, Jolanta and I spent the next

day in Philadelphia, where we toured the Thaddeus Kosciuszko house, home to the

famous Polish soldier who was instrumental in our own Revolutionary War. Many

Polish-Americans still lived in the neighborhood. I hosted a luncheon for Jolanta at the

Philadelphia Museum of Art, and to commemorate the visit, the Pennsylvania Academy

of the Fine Arts offered to loan us a painting for the White House. I chose a Karl

Anderson piece, painted by the brother of the writer Sherwood Anderson, best known for

his *Winesburg, Ohio.* We hung it in our bedroom.

The following week, I traded in my blush-colored tulle state dinner gown for

jeans, a floppy hat, and hiking boots. My destination was Yellowstone National Park. I

was meeting four of my childhood friends.

Our first summer hiking trip had been to the Grand Canyon National Park, the

year we turned forty. For three years in the 1990s, we had entered the lottery to stay at the

tented campsites inside Yosemite National Park in California. But we were never picked.

After George was elected president, I told my friends, "We finally won the lottery." In the

summer of 2001, we at last hiked around Yosemite's gorgeous scenery. Then Ron

Sprinkle, the head of my Secret Service detail and a former law enforcement ranger in

Yellowstone, told me we had to visit his former national park. We stayed in rangers'

cabins in the deserted backcountry and rode horses through a massive downpour one

afternoon. We camped in a lone cabin on Peak Island, where an enormous old tree blew

over and nearly landed on our roof, and in another spot where at dusk an awkward and

skinny-legged teenage moose wandered past the five of us. We dipped our feet in hot,

rushing creeks and watched as the mighty geyser Old Faithful spewed its water aloft. We

hiked past the bubbling mud pots and gazed upon the forests where massive wildfires had

blackened and scarred the trees, and where new, green saplings were now pushing their

way up from the once-charred ground. With the cool tree canopy gone, the old forest

floor was carpeted with wildflowers, blooming in the unexpected sunlight. We talked as

we walked the trails and read poetry at night as the stars hung above us in the sky.

I came to cherish these annual trips, not simply for the uninterrupted pleasure of

friendship but for the chance to be out in nature, to be unencumbered by schedules,

appointments, and the constant forward rush of time. We could pick up our friendships as

if one year had not passed, as if we had all been together the month or week before. It is

hard sometimes, for women especially, to steal time for friends. The demands on us from

families, from jobs, from every other commitment are so strong and unrelenting. But

friendship is what nurtures us. My friends were often my sustenance during the White

House years. We could talk, laugh, and simply be. Sharing those trails renewed me, body

and soul.

I

returned

to

Washington, and George and I began to contemplate the first

anniversary of 9-11. On September 10, I spoke at the opening of the 9-11 exhibition at

the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. It was in the same building that

housed the first ladies' inaugural gowns, including my own. Gathered with me among the

invited guests were Hillary Clinton, Colin Powell, and Pentagon rescue workers. The

exhibition, "September 11: Bearing Witness to History," was a collection of objects and

artifacts from 9-11, including the briefcase that belonged to a woman who worked on the

103rd floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center. She had miraculously

escaped. There was a squeegee that had been used by maintenance workers to pry open

an elevator in the Trade Center's North Tower and a metal crowbar used by a fireman to

break through wallboard.

Fire Battalion Chief Joseph Pfeifer, who had helped direct the rescue operations

that morning, stood beside the crowbar and spoke of sending another firefighter up into

the burning towers. "I told him to go up, go up with his company, but not to go any

higher than seventy. . . . After I told him, he stood there, and in the silence we looked at

each other, and he turned around and he walked over to his men and took them upstairs.

That was the last time I saw that lieutenant. That lieutenant was my brother, Kevin." The

crowbar on display was the one that Kevin had been carrying. It was found next to his

body in the rubble.

Near the crowbar, Joseph Pfeifer's helmet, boots, and coat were now also

preserved. "My definition of a hero," Pfeifer said that morning, "is one of ordinary people

doing the ordinary right thing at an extraordinary time." The exhibition also included a

twisted piece of steel from the South Tower, a crushed fire truck door, and a partially

melted television screen from the Pentagon. In its own glass display was the bullhorn that

George had used, standing on the towers' rubble, to tell the rescue workers, "I can hear

you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down

will hear all of us soon."

There was also a section from one of the many walls of prayers that had dotted

Manhattan, this one by Bellevue Hospital, where people had posted notes and pictures,

searching for loved ones. I spoke of the love we will always share with the heroes, "both

here and beyond."

The following day, we began with a service at St. John's Church, across Lafayette

Square from the White House. The Reverend Luis Leon, a refugee from Cuba sent to our

shores by his parents to start a new life in freedom, delivered the sermon. He had fled on

the frantic "Pedro Pan," or Peter Pan airlifts of children as Fidel Castro was seizing

power. He would never see his father again. Leon spoke of that terrible morning of

September 11. He likened it to a tattoo on our national soul. We who were alive on that

morning were marked by it, indelibly and forever. "Mr. President," he said, "you never

asked me why the terrorists did it. But I think they did it because this is a country where

an immigrant can preach to the president."

At precisely 8:46 a.m., the moment the first plane had struck the North Tower of

the World Trade Center one year ago, we stood on the South Lawn of the White House

and bowed our heads for a moment of silence. Standing with us were Dick and Lynne

Cheney, the cabinet, and the senior and White House staff, including the residence staff,

the chefs from the kitchen, the doormen, the ushers and butlers, telephone operators, and

maintenance workers, all of whom had come together to remember those we had lost. We

observed that moment of silence each September 11 for the next six years, and the

tradition continues still.

From there we went first to the Pentagon, where twelve thousand men and women

in uniform had gathered, then to Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and then to New York. We

laid wreaths and listened to prayers; in Pennsylvania the two ministers who spoke were

relatives of the victims of Flight 93. At the Pentagon, in Pennsylvania, and in New York,

we spent time visiting with the families of those who had died. They had survived their

year of firsts--first Thanksgiving, first Christmas or Hanukkah, first New Year's, first

Valentine's Day, first Easter or Passover, first birthday, first wedding anniversary, first

Mother's or Father's Day. But I knew that as the years continued to pass, those absences

would accumulate, and at some terrible tipping point, the days dead would outnumber the

days alive. Nearly all the families had brought pictures, and they wanted me to know

about the person they had lost. They talked about how funny he was, what a great mother

she had been, or what a wonderful brother or sister. It was important for them to talk

about those whom they had loved and lost. The talking soothed, and it helped to keep the

one they loved alive in their hearts. So many had lost the person they loved the best.

We stayed in New York that night because on the heels of September 11 came the

annual opening of the United Nations. It had been postponed the previous year, but this

fall the General Assembly would be reconvening with its usual pomp and circumstance.

The streets would be clogged with arriving heads of state and other world leaders making

their way to grand receptions; roadblocks and traffic barricades would bring much of

midtown Manhattan to a standstill. I had been working for weeks on a reception that

George and I would host that night at the Winter Garden at the World Financial Center,

just steps from where the Twin Towers had stood. But first, in the morning, George was

slated to address the international delegates at the UN.

His announcement that the United States would rejoin UNESCO was warmly

received. But the balance of his speech dealt with Iraq. He cited that fact that it had been

four years since the last UN inspectors had set foot in Iraq. He reviewed Saddam

Hussein's flagrant defiance of multiple UN resolutions. I listened as George said, "The

first time we may be completely certain he has a nuclear weapon is when, God forbid, he

uses one." He laid out a series of steps for Saddam, giving him a road map to peace,

including disclose, remove, and destroy weapons of mass destruction and long-range

missiles; end all support for terrorism; cease persecuting his civilian population; and stop

exploiting the oil-for-food program for his personal gain. He then called on the world to

hold Iraq's regime to account. "With every step the Iraqi regime takes toward gaining and

deploying the most terrible weapons, our own options to confront that regime will

narrow. . . . We must choose between a world of fear and a world of progress. We cannot

stand by and do nothing while dangers gather."

What he did not say, but what everyone surmised, was that there were two paths

now before us: peace or war. And what we would choose depended in large measure on

whether, in Baghdad, Saddam Hussein was listening and would heed these words.

Days later, we had the chance to return V'clav and Dagmar Havel's hospitality

with a visit to Washington. Both Dagmar and I were wearing navy blue dresses for the

black-tie dinner, and when we paused for White House photos on the red carpet, she was

overcome with a fit of giggles; neither of us had thought to coordinate what we were

wearing. It was a lighthearted evening, especially for the Havels. The previous August

enormous floods along the Moldau River had engulfed the city of Prague. Marine guards

and other U.S. Embassy employees, including our ambassador, Craig Stapleton, had gone

to work cleaning out the knee-high mud and debris from flooded historic buildings

throughout the city, saving priceless artifacts. The Havels wanted to express the deep

gratitude of the Czech people. Ours, they told us, had been the only embassy and the only

ambassador to help. It is easy to be proud of our country, because when there is a need,

Americans' first instinct is to respond.

On the late afternoon of October 2, a single shot rang out across the D.C. city line

in Montgomery County, Maryland. More than twenty-four hours later, after multiple

sniper-style shootings in suburban Maryland and Northwest Washington, six people lay

dead, among them a seventy-two-year-old retired carpenter, a thirty-nine-year-old

landscaper who had been mowing a lawn, a fifty-four-year-old man who had been

pumping gas, and a twenty-five-year-old mom who had been vacuuming her minivan.

Each had been killed by a long-range rifle shot. Within a day the sniper had extended his

deadly attacks into Virginia, shooting a forty-three-year-old woman as she loaded

packages from a craft store, and then a few days later killing a forty-seven-year-old

woman in the parking lot of a Home Depot. There were no suspects, no witnesses; the

only clue was a tarot card left behind at one scene. Washington and the surrounding

suburbs as far away as Richmond, Virginia, went into panic. Parks and playgrounds were

suddenly deserted; parents were afraid to let their children wait at a bus stop or ride the

bus to school. Parking lots sat empty. People crouched on their knees to fill their gas

tanks, hoping to avoid giving the anonymous sniper a clear target.

After each new shooting, police set up roadblocks on major arteries and searched

cars, vans, and trucks. Large black federal response vehicles idled along main roads,

waiting to spring into action at the first report of another sniper attack. In the midst of

these shootings, on October 6, we were invited to dinner at the Chevy Chase home of the

columnist George Will and his wife, Mari, along with David McCullough and his wife,

Rosalee, and the Civil War historian James McPherson and his wife, Patricia. It was less

than a week after the first sniper attack, and there were still no leads. Hours in advance

the local streets were blocked off, and when we arrived, with the usual police escort, a

dark helicopter circled overhead, its rotors thumping against the evening sky. On the

surrounding streets, neighbors bolted their doors and cringed in fear. They thought all the

security gathered on the street meant that the sniper had struck again.

As the sniper's rampage continued, we were preparing for the second National

Book Festival, to be held outside, underneath tents on the National Mall. Forty-five

thousand people came to hear over seventy authors, and I brought a special guest,

Lyudmila Putina. I had invited her during our spring visit. I liked Lyudmila, even though

our conversations always had a slightly stilted quality because they were conducted via

an interpreter. Lyudmila was engaging, and we both loved reading and books. I found

myself thinking back to that long-ago Houston summer when I sat in the sweltering heat

and read the classics of Russian literature, never knowing that my journey would lead me

here.

Lyudmila accompanied me to the opening ceremonies for the festival in the East

Room and then to the festival itself, where we walked through the tents and listened to

authors. This was her first trip to the United States without her husband. She told me that

she wanted to host her own book festival in Moscow, a remarkable step in a country

where little more than a decade ago the bookstores were government-controlled. Many

moments from that day stayed with me, but of particular note were the closing remarks

by the historian David McCullough, in which he described John Adams's quest for

knowledge: "The greatest gift of all, he was certain, was the gift of an inquiring mind."

McCullough quoted Adams, saying, "I shall have the liberty to think for myself," and he

added, "We face a foe today who believes in enforced ignorance. We don't." That

plainspoken statement says so much about America, then and now.

On October 24, the Beltway sniper, John Allen Muhammad, and his accomplice,

Lee Boyd Malvo, were finally captured, sleeping in their car at a rest stop off a Maryland

highway. Malvo later testified that one of the aims of the killings had been eventually to

extort money from the government so that they could "set up a camp to train children

how to terrorize cities." On December 12, I made the annual Christmas visit to the

Children's National Medical Center, a tradition among first ladies dating back to Bess

Truman and Jackie Kennedy. One of my escorts was Iran Brown, a thirteen-year-old boy

who had miraculously survived being shot by the sniper in the chest outside his middle

school in Bowie, Maryland, just after eight o'clock in the morning on October 7. He was

one of only three victims who survived. Ten others died.

At the end of October, I was in the air again with George, off to Mexico for the

APEC Leaders' Meeting. In November it was back to Europe with George for a NATO

meeting and stops in Lithuania and St. Petersburg, where I saw Lyudmila. Our friendship

was built not simply out of frequent meetings but the common threads of our lives. Like

me, Lyudmila had two daughters, Maria and Yekaterina, both close in age to Barbara and

Jenna. The Putins were proud that their daughters were fluent in English and several

other languages. During a visit that previous summer to the Putins' dacha--a sprawling,

steep-roofed house in the middle of a birch forest just west of Moscow--the girls played

violin and piano for us. Another time, Vladimir proudly showed George the chapel he

had built inside the compound and his stables, where a troop of Russian riders treated us

to a command acrobatic performance. And as I walked through the dacha's brightly

painted rooms with their massive fireplaces, I thought back to Lyudmila's surprise at

seeing all the windows and open doors at our Texas ranch. Frigid Moscow winters and

nights do not lend themselves to vast expanses of clear glass.

On this November visit to St. Petersburg, Lyudmila and I toured the beautifully

restored Catherine Palace, and we were both drawn to Catherine's large, even indulgent,

windows. Outside, the ground was covered with snow, and the lights from the palace

reflected off the snow and then back off the windows until they resembled a kind of

infinite light. I stood gazing out, imagining myself in some past century racing in a horsedrawn troika across the white, frozen ground. Off in other rooms, George and Vladimir

discussed the complex issues of Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Republicans had won an unprecedented victory in the 2002 midterm

congressional elections, the first time the party of a newly elected president had won

seats in both houses of Congress since Franklin Roosevelt in 1934. According to a Gallup

poll, George's approval rating stood at 68 percent. He was, the pollsters declared, "wildly

popular." But we did not spend our days thinking about those numbers. Poll numbers are

ephemeral; we did not live our lives by them. With the election now in the past, what

stretched before us was the future, and every contour of it was unknown.

On December 4, I hosted thirteen women teachers from Afghanistan at the White

House. Selected from across the country's provinces, they had already spent five weeks in

a special professional training program run by the University of Nebraska at Omaha,

where they lived with local families. I thought of them being welcomed into those solid,

loving midwestern homes, eating Thanksgiving dinner, with heaping plates of turkey and

dressing, biscuits and pie, and getting to know their American hosts. Each teacher who

came had pledged to teach ten new teachers once she returned home. I hoped they would

teach them everything they had learned, in the classroom and beyond. We had coffee, and

as I walked them through the White House, I started to dream of making my own visit to

Afghanistan.

We began our second holiday season, this time celebrating "All Creatures Great

and Small," with animals incorporated into nearly every decoration, even cookies in the

shape of Barney. We hosted night after night of events, including the annual

Congressional Ball for nearly one thousand guests, all the members and their invitees. I

had selected the image for our holiday card months before, a painting by Zheng-Huan Lu

of the State Floor's beautiful piano, with its proud gold eagles, designed by Steinway for

Franklin Roosevelt.

Christmas cards are a relatively new tradition at the White House. During the first

half of the twentieth century, presidents primarily sent cards to family and close friends.

But thousands of Americans mailed their own cards to the White House. Calvin

Coolidge, who held the first National Christmas Tree lighting ceremony, received twelve

thousand cards from the public in 1924, the same year that his beloved son died. In 1933,

Franklin Roosevelt received forty thousand cards, so many that he needed to hire extra

staff to open the mail. Christmas cards were rare during the time of Abraham Lincoln, but

cartoonist Thomas Nast, the man credited with popularizing Santa Claus, had designed

campaign posters for Lincoln's 1860 election. In 1863, at the height of the Civil War,

Lincoln commissioned Nast to create a cover image for *Harper's Weekly* depicting Father

Christmas welcoming Union troops. Among recent presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower

was the first to send out large numbers of White House Christmas cards. Six Eisenhowerera cards featured his own paintings, including portraits he did of Lincoln and

Washington and several of his favorite landscapes. This December I inscribed our card

with the words "May love and peace fill your heart and home during this holiday season

and throughout the New Year."

On December 18, ABC broadcast Barbara Walters's annual special on the Ten

Most Fascinating People of the year. Barbara had selected me as 2002's most fascinating

person, calling me a "beacon of calm in the center of the storm." It was flattering, but

even as it aired, I said to George with a smile, "Bushie, what goes up must come down."

On Christmas Eve at Camp David, George continued his annual ritual of placing

calls to our troops. That day he was reaching out to men and women in the dusty, frigid

landscape of Afghanistan and on other bases and ships around the world. At night we

watched the Christmas pageant and Nativity play, retelling the centuries-old story of

Christ's birth, performed by the children of the sailors and Marines stationed at Camp

David. We smiled as a few pint-size angels, shepherds, and sheep scrunched up their

faces in tears, overcome by sheer excitement and exhaustion. All of our family--George's

parents, his brothers and sister and their children, Barbara and Jenna, and my mother--had

gathered with us. On Christmas Day, George prayed that next holiday season he would

not be calling men and women in yet another war zone.

On November 25, Barbara and Jenna had turned twenty-one. We celebrated just

after Thanksgiving with a big party and a campout at the ranch with food from Tom

Perini's Buffalo Gap chuckwagon. Our girls were now technically adults, looking out on

a new world of their own. I treasured the few days and weeks that we had together

through the year before they returned to their own lives. They were with us for that

Christmas in the woods at Camp David, and a few days after they left, George sat down

and typed out a thank-you note to them for his gifts. The note was full of fatherly love,

but one line in particular has always stayed with me. He told Jenna and Barbara that he

prayed that Saddam Hussein would disarm, that he would give up his weapons of death

and destruction, and that there would be peace. He ended that paragraph with his usual

effort to turn something so achingly serious into a lighter moment, assuring the girls that

they need not worry that their dad somehow lacked for things to do.

George did not want war. No president ever does. He knew how precious any

child is, and every person sent into war is someone's child, and often someone's mother or

father too.

He turned to prayer in these times not with some newfound religion but because

he had always turned to prayer. He found the first stirrings of his own faith after his sister

Robin died. At age seven, at a Midland football game, he said to his dad that Robin,

looking down from the stars in Heaven, had the better view. As a young Air National

Guard pilot, when George came home, his mother would find an open Bible wherever he

had been around the house. He was reading every word, as he would do, again and again,

for years. His belief was always in something far larger than himself. He believed in the

power of faith for compassion and comfort, as he must have felt it all those years ago, as

a young boy watching his parents grieve the loss of their beloved daughter and who had

grieved himself, as a small child would, with an ache beyond words.

I remember one late afternoon in the White House when Barbara was wrestling

with a particularly difficult problem. George went to her room and sat down on her bed to

console her as she told him what was wrong. He would not leave until he had begun to

make it better. Afterward, I walked into my small upstairs office next to Barbara's room

and found one of my young staff members in tears. She had heard bits and pieces of the

conversation through the thin connecting door. She was sobbing, telling me how

desperately she wished that she had had a father like George.

There would be no war for oil or for some kind of U.S. presence in the Middle

East. There was war because only one man would not choose peace. That man was

Saddam Hussein.

Before we would make any foreign visits, George and I would be briefed on the

leaders and the conditions inside of the country. Often I was given printed biographies of

national leaders. Occasionally, much to my surprise, those briefings would be wrong. It

was usually just small details, such as what the first lady did--I remember once saying,

"So, you are a teacher, like I was?" only to get a stare of disbelief after the translator had

finished and the reply, "No, I am an engineer." Once we were told that the president of

South Korea adored bowling. As a gift, because all leaders bring gifts for official visits,

we had a beautiful custom-made bowling ball inscribed with the U.S. and South Korean

flags. The South Korean president opened the gift and had no idea what it was; he had

probably never been bowling in his life. The ball must have looked to him like some kind

of lethal paperweight. More often than not, these embarrassing errors were based on

gossip, on conversations overheard at cocktail parties or picked up by U.S. Embassy

staff. Some mistakes were the results of simple language barriers or bad translation. But

no one ever believed that our intelligence would make a mistake about whether or not

Saddam Hussein had military weapons of mass destruction.

For that matter, our intelligence was confirmed by the Germans, the French, the

Russians, the Israelis, the Jordanians, and the Egyptians. The major intelligence services

in Europe and the Middle East, indeed in the rest of the world, stated that Saddam

Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. In January of 2003, a key Middle Eastern

leader warned U.S. general Tommy Franks that Saddam "will use WMD--biologicals,

actually--on your troops." Here at home, Bill Clinton and Al Gore believed Saddam had

weapons of mass destruction. So did leading members of Congress, including John

Kerry, Hillary Clinton, Jay Rockefeller, Joe Biden, and John Edwards. The big open

question was how close Saddam's scientists were to creating a nuclear bomb. The

unfolding debate was over whether the United States and its allies should go to war to

prevent Saddam from having the chance to use those weapons himself or to divert them

to terrorists, or whether we should continue more years of sanctions, which had been in

place since 1990.

After 9-11, George did not feel that he could subject the safety of other American

cities or American civilians to the whims of one man. For George, the potential dangers

we faced were numerous. What if he gambled on containing Saddam and was wrong?

What if his gamble cost tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of lives in a terror

attack on U.S. soil?

Beyond the deep worry over weapons of mass destruction, in Saddam Hussein's

Iraq, U.S. national security and common humanity intersected. Few tyrants on the world

stage abused human rights like Saddam. The images were haunting and pervasive.

Saddam had repeatedly ordered mass killings of Iraq's Kurdish minority. Best estimates

are that tens of thousands of men, women, and children were gassed with chemical

weapons or rounded up and executed in deserts far from their mountainous, northern

homes. After the 1991 Gulf War, Saddam executed hundreds of his Kuwaiti captives and

launched strikes on Shi'ites, Kurds, and other ethnic groups that he thought might be a

threat to his regime. George and I heard stories of little children forced to witness their

parents being gunned down with bullets to the back of the head. We heard of Saddam's

opponents who were tossed from the open doors of flying planes, plunging to a grisly

death; we heard about torture chambers where electrical wires were wrapped around

young men's testicles and prisoners hung from molten hooks. Saddam read the works of

Adolf Hitler and required his top Ba'ath Party officials to read *Mein Kampf*. He patterned

much of his regime after that of the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, who had ruthlessly

repressed his nation; as did the Nazis and the Soviets, Saddam and his Ba'ath Party elites

recruited children to spy on parents and neighbors. No one can say for sure how many

Iraqis were killed under Saddam's orders--the number is too high--but the estimates range

from many hundreds of thousands to 1 million. Human Rights Watch has said that

290,000 Iraqis alone were "disappeared" by the Iraqi government over two decades.

Saddam had already been to war with Iran and had invaded Kuwait. Inside the

national security community, in the age of al Qaeda and the post-9-11 world, there were

fresh worries that he was a ticking time bomb.

Throughout the fall and winter, George attempted to persuade Saddam to disarm.

He did not act alone. In October he sought a congressional resolution to authorize "the

use of military force against Iraq." It passed the Senate 77-23, with Senators Kerry,

Clinton, Biden, Edwards, and Reid all voting in favor. In November he sought and

received a unanimous UN Security Council resolution calling on Saddam to disarm or

disclose his weapons. He also sent private messages to Saddam through the French and

the Russians. A few nations indicated that they could be persuaded to offer Saddam

refuge if he chose exile. But when the offers were raised, Saddam refused to go. We

waited, hoping for a last-minute breakthrough, for some kind of reprieve.

On February 1, 2003, the space shuttle *Columbia* exploded as it began its reentry

toward the earth, streaking like an enormous comet across the atmosphere. From thirtynine miles above, debris and remains dropped from the skies over Texas. On board were

seven astronauts, including two women and the first Israeli ever to fly in space. Ilan

Ramon, the Israeli mission specialist, had said on January 29 that viewing the earth from

the reaches of space made him realize how fragile the planet is, and also how important it

is to strive for peace in the Middle East. Three days after that, I was hugging his wife at a

memorial service in Houston.

Just as we returned to Washington, the FBI and other federal agencies raised the

threat level for the District of Columbia. While residents continued to drive along the

Beltway or hop the Metro, high-tech weaponry was quietly moved around the perimeter

of the city. The military was placed on high alert. Unbeknownst to most people living in

and around the capital, handheld missile launchers, capable of shooting down rogue

airplanes or helicopters, were arrayed on mobile vehicles around Washington. The

Pentagon also deployed other wide-ranging air defense and ground-to-air missile

systems. Antiaircraft defense units were placed on alert in the vicinity of the capital, and

heat-seeking antiaircraft missiles were visibly stationed on at least one Washington

bridge. Blackhawk helicopters and F-16 fighter jets patrolled the skies. U.S. Capitol

Police were issued submachine guns. Washington was the number one target for

terrorists, and the White House was designated as the top terrorist target in D.C.

In the weeks that followed, residents were advised to buy supplies, like plastic

sheeting and duct tape, to create windowless safe rooms that could withstand a chemical

attack, and to lay in stockpiles of canned food. The anxiety was so great and the

intelligence chatter so disturbing that some civilian assistant secretaries and others who

worked at the Pentagon would, on some days, call their wives and children at 7:00 a.m.

and tell them to stay out of the city for the next twenty-four hours. For those of us who

lived in Washington, there was nothing to do but get up each morning and face the day.

In late February of 2003, I met with governors' wives and the Military Child

Education Coalition to explore ways to make moves across state lines easier on military

families. Many school districts wouldn't allow students to transfer their GPAs, so a

straight A student and potential valedictorian's existing academic record vanished once he

or she moved to a new school district. Together we worked to streamline the process.

Commonsense initiatives like this aren't glamorous or headline-grabbing, but they solve

problems. Many state first ladies helped to change rules and regulations to make transfers

easier on the spouses and children of our armed forces. As March began, I called the

mother of a ten-month-old girl who had received a heart transplant while her father was

stationed with the Army in Kuwait. I could only imagine how hard it would be for a

mother and father to face such a serious medical crisis under any condition, let alone

when the dad was deployed half a world away.

In the winter of 2003, politics had begun to intrude more fully into the East Wing.

From the beginning of George's term, I had worked to showcase American literature and

the arts in the White House, first with music and then with writers. In late November of

2001, I hosted a symposium on Mark Twain, including Twain scholars and the filmmaker

Ken Burns, who was preparing to unveil his documentary on the writer. Mark Twain is

considered America's first real novelist, writing in the style and the vernacular of the

young nation. George and I had always loved Twain's frankness and his razor-sharp

mockery and wit. George's favorite Twain quotation is "Do the right thing. It will gratify

some people and astonish the rest." After the symposium, we had the additional pleasure

of going to Ford's Theatre to see the legendary Hal Holbrook's one-man show on Twain.

In March of 2002, I hosted an event to highlight the Harlem Renaissance, where we

discussed the syncopated, jazzy rhythm of Langston Hughes's poetry and the beautifully

rendered novels of Zora Neale Hurston and other great writers of the age. The

symposiums included scholarly addresses and lively panels debating the meaning behind

the words. We talked about how these African-American writers began to create a

twentieth-century and distinctly Black American identity with a rich culture of its own.

The following September my topic was women writers of the American West. We

explored the lives and works of Willa Cather and Edna Ferber, author of the novel *Giant,*

who wrote, "The sunbonnet as well as the sombrero has helped settle this glorious land of

ours." The final author I selected for the event was Laura Ingalls Wilder, the writer I had

loved since I was a little girl. Some of her descendants attended. Each of these writers

had her own complex love affair with the wild, untamed land of the West that she called

home and that I so loved.

But many of the scholars we invited did not, at first, want to come. David

Levering Lewis, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of W. E. B. DuBois, told *The New*

York Times that he was shocked when my office invited him. A leading Twain scholar

was so surprised he told my staff he'd have to call them back, and Ursula Smith, a scholar

of the American frontier, also didn't initially want to come. I found that sad. Everyone

can appreciate and enjoy literature; books do not come with a "do not read" sign for

Democrats, independents, or Republicans. Some of the participants believed that I did not

read widely. But they came away with their minds changed. The western scholar Patricia

Limerick later said, "I did Mrs. Bush a terrible disservice thinking that maybe she didn't

know, that she thought these [works] were all little houses on the prairie."

We ultimately had rich discussions, and all our literary events included

Washington, D.C., high school students. But that was the end result. The first impulse,

too often, was prejudice. Most of us over the course of our lives are guilty of some kind

of stereotyping, but I have always found it a uniquely distressing attribute in people who

study and teach. For these are the people who have chosen as their profession the life of

the mind, and they are the ones whom we trust to teach our children. They, who have had

every educational benefit, should welcome different thoughts and viewpoints. But so

many responded to a White House invitation with their minds closed. And that was

particularly true of a significant group of poets.

I have long been a reader of poetry, and I very much wanted to host a symposium

featuring the works of Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, and Walt Whitman. I planned

the gathering for February 12, 2003. But one of the invited poets sent a blast e-mail to

fifty friends asking for antiwar poems and statements. He refused to attend but wanted

another guest to present me with an antiwar anthology and have the event become an

antiwar protest. What would have brought the works of three great American writers into

American homes via C-SPAN was now set to become a forum for a purely political

agenda. With real regret I postponed the event. It was never rescheduled. I had not

selected the poets on the basis of politics, nor had the guest list been political. I wondered

what victory the invitees thought they had won by keeping the East Room dark and

silencing some of the nation's most eloquent writers.

In March of 2004 I held a symposium on Southern writers featuring Truman

Capote, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor. It was to be my last literary symposium

in the White House. Each of these writers was in his or her own way familiar with

prejudice, which comes in many forms. I find particular beauty in the words of Eudora

Welty, who over the years grew hunchbacked and misshapen but who created some of

the most complex characters ever to appear on the printed page. She was a reader as well

as a writer and once penned, "I learned from the age of two or three that any room in our

house, at any time of day, was there to read in, or to be read to. It had been startling and

disappointing to me to find out that storybooks had been written by *people*, that books

were not natural wonders, coming up of themselves like grass."

The girls came home often that spring. Jenna flew up to spend a weekend with us

at Camp David; Barbara spent her spring break at the White House. They wanted to be

with us as the nation edged toward war. I tried to keep things as normal as possible inside

the White House. Old friends, including Roland Betts, one of George's best friends from

Yale, and his wife, Lois, and Mike and Barbara Proctor, came. Mike was George's

childhood best friend, who had lived across the street and was a helicopter pilot in

Vietnam. Mike and Nancy Weiss, our friends from Lubbock, also came. They all wanted

to be there for George because they knew how their friend was agonizing.

The usual round of Washington events continued unabated. We hosted a reception

for the annual Ford's Theatre gala to celebrate President Lincoln and dressed in white tie

for the dinner hosted by the Gridiron Club, Washington's oldest journalistic organization,

founded in 1885. Jeannette Kagame, the first lady of Rwanda, visited Washington, and I

had her to coffee at the White House. But with war increasingly looming, George's every

thought was on our troops, Iraq, and Saddam.

For the better part of six months, I had been planning to host a group of my old

Midland friends for four days at the White House, to tour Washington gardens, including

Mount Vernon. I had been looking forward to seeing them, as had Susie Evans, my

kindergarten friend and George's second-grade friend, who had moved from Midland to

Washington, D.C., when her husband, Don, became the secretary of commerce. But when

the days arrived, I regretted the invitation. I could tell that it irritated George to have a

group of women sitting around, laughing, talking, opening a bottle of wine as he strode

off to the Treaty Room after dinner for one of his frequent nighttime meetings with Condi

Rice and her National Security Council deputy, Stephen Hadley. Many evenings, after

most of official Washington had left its offices and gone home, they met in the residence

to review, strategize, and question. The butlers put out chips and drinks, but they

remained largely untouched.

Late one afternoon, Barbara called home. The teaching assistant in one of her

classes at Yale had starkly told her, "I will only give you an A in this class if you tell your

father not to go to war." Barbara handled the situation herself, making an appointment to

speak to the dean of her residential college, who said that she should submit all her

coursework directly to her professor.

We knew exactly how deep the passions ran before any American soldiers set foot

on Iraqi sands.

In early March, antiwar protesters converged on Washington, waving signs and

shouting epithets while George and Tony Blair worked to get the United Nations to vote

on a final resolution taking Saddam to task for violating seventeen previous UN

resolutions and authorizing military action if he refused to cooperate. In Washington,

London, and New York, the days and nights turned into a marathon negotiating session,

as our military began the final preparations for war.

On the night before the scheduled UN vote, George, Condi Rice, and I were

eating dinner in the residence. All afternoon George had been placing last-minute calls to

world leaders, including Vicente Fox of Mexico and Ricardo Lagos of Chile, soliciting

their support for the resolution. George and Tony hoped the UN vote would convince

Saddam of the international community's resolve and lead to a peaceful outcome, but

other leaders were fearful that the two men were asking them to commit to war. The

mood was somber as Condi and George reviewed the latest vote count and waited for

word.

George never wavered under the pressure. It was the same as that moment after 911 at the height of the anthrax attacks, when he strode out to the mound, alone in the

middle of Yankee Stadium, and threw out the first pitch. He has never been afraid to step

up to the plate for whatever was required. When he first ran for president, he told his staff

that he didn't want to make campaign promises that he could not deliver. He said, "If I

run on something and say I'm going to do this, make sure it's something that really can be

done." He is very disciplined and practical. He did not want to invade Iraq, but most of

the global intelligence community was telling him that, the next time, a 9-11 could

happen with chemical or biological weapons. We had been brutally attacked once; he

would not allow it to happen again.

I remember too how during those weeks I would glance out from my sitting room

window and see George walking Spot outside the Oval Office. On the lawn he could be

alone with his thoughts. He was sending the best of America to fight and even die in Iraq

because he thought it was the safest thing to do for our country. It was a decision that he

had always hoped he would not have to make.

The UN resolution to authorize force was withdrawn in mid-March, after France,

Russia, and Germany came together to announce their opposition. George and Tony Blair

went ahead with their plans to depose Saddam Hussein. Troops from the United States,

Great Britain, Poland, and Australia were readied; ultimately, more than forty nations

would send troops or military support. On March 17, George gave Saddam and his sons

one more chance, a forty-eight-hour deadline to leave the country and avoid war. Saddam

and his sons did not leave. On March 19, at just past 9:30 p.m., U.S.-led coalition forces

began high-precision bombing strikes on Baghdad. Less than twelve hours later,

Americans and Iraqis had their first skirmish on the ground. We were at war.

I have often wondered if Jacques Chirac or Gerhard Schroeder could have done

more, if one of them could have persuaded Saddam to go into exile, if they could have

conveyed that the United States was not bluffing. After Saddam was finally pulled from

his spider hole, looking like a madman, he said that he had not believed the United States

would invade; he had not believed we were serious.

By June of 2003, American and British forces had located eighty of the countless

mass graves in Iraq. Buried within were the remains of thousands of people whom

Saddam Hussein had ordered to be killed. Long hair still hung from some of the skulls;

they belonged to the women. United States forces found a police station with torture

hooks hanging from the ceiling and a special "electrocution room," bare except for two

tires and an electric cable. Saddam Hussein's regime was a regime of terror, in large ways

and small ones. Uday Hussein, Saddam's son, who headed Iraq's Olympic committee,

would torture athletes who failed to win, beating the soles of their feet until they could no

longer walk. He raped women with impunity. In fits of rage, he would hit his victims

with a metal bar or a cane.

When U.S. troops captured the Baghdad mansion of Uday and his brother, Qusay,

I was in Austin, visiting Jenna. I was just walking into Regan's house when the head of

my Secret Service detail, Wayne Williams, took me aside. He told me that pictures of

Barbara and Jenna were found plastered on the walls of Uday's palace. American troops

had torn them down, he said. He was stone-faced, but inside I felt as though we were both

shaking. I spoke with George, and for months afterward, I was sick with worry. But we

did not say a word to the girls.

George and I worried for our troops every day. I thought of them in the harshest

conditions, sleeping, when they could, with the sand and the wind. I had told a group of

soldiers at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, about how guilty I felt with my comforts while they

went off to fight and had none. And each one immediately said, "Mrs. Bush, that's where

we want to be." They loved their country, and they would do anything to protect it and to

protect the men and women who served with them. But night after night I would picture

our troops, I would worry, and I would pray.

Once, during an interview, Barbara Walters asked me if I could empathize with a

mother who sent her child to be a suicide bomber. I said no, I could not imagine a mother

who would want her child to blow himself up and kill other people at the same time.

Mothers in our country have watched and prayed as their children left our shores to

defend our freedom, and the freedom of people we will never meet in places we will

likely never visit. Not only can't I empathize with the mother of a suicide bomber, I can't

even imagine her.

On April 3, U.S. forces were racing toward Baghdad. Early that morning George

and I flew to North Carolina, to the Marine training ground and base at Camp Lejeune.

Already seventeen Marines from Lejeune's overseas division had been wounded and

fourteen killed. Two were missing. They had lost the most of any base so far. George

spoke to the troops still there and their families, as well as the loved ones of those who

had been deployed. After lunch in the mess hall, we met with the families of the fallen

Marines. One sergeant had left behind a six-year-old, a two-year-old, and two-month-old

twins. We cried with their wives, parents, and children. The following week I joined

George as he awarded Purple Hearts to wounded soldiers in the intensive care unit at

Walter Reed Army Medical Center and to wounded Marines in the ICU at Bethesda

Naval Hospital. We visited some seventy wounded troops and many of their families, and

together we watched as two wounded Marines were sworn in as U.S. citizens. Twentyyear-old Lance Corporal O. J. Santamaria, from the Philippines, broke down as he took

his oath. George walked over to hug him. Master Gunnery Sergeant Guadalupe Denogean

from Mexico, the son of migrant farm workers, had spent twenty-five years in the Marine

Corps and had fought in two wars before taking his citizenship oath. George told both

men he was proud to call them "fellow Americans." We have, he said, an amazing

country, where people are willing to risk their lives without even being full citizens.

On a trip to Arizona, I stopped to see the family of Army Private First Class Lori

Piestewa, a twenty-three-year-old Hopi mother who had been killed during the first week

of the war after an ambush by Iraqi forces near Nasiriyah. She had fought back bravely

and had paid with her life. Lori was the first Native American woman to die in combat

while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. For two weeks she was listed as missing in

action, until her body was found in a shallow grave. Her roommate and friend, Jessica

Lynch, who was riding in the truck that Lori drove, had survived.

Lori Piestewa came from Tuba City, Arizona, home also to Moenkopi, a Hopi

enclave in the heart of the Navajo Nation reservation. Some homes in the Hopi village

still did not have running water; women and men carried buckets to a nearby river. For

heat they burned tree branches, and the air hung with the scent of char and smoke, even

in the spring. Most of the houses were the same adobe style that had been built for

centuries in these dry desert lands. Lori, whose parents had both worked for the Tuba

City schools, had grown up on the Navajo side of the reservation. Her father had fought

in Vietnam; her grandfather had served in World War II. Lori had been the commanding

officer of her high school Junior ROTC program. Her parents buried her on Hopi land. I

met them, along with her three-year-old daughter and four-year-old son, one of her

sisters, a brother, a sister-in-law, and her four nieces and nephews in a room at Page

Municipal Airport, a tiny airstrip overlooking the Colorado River and Lake Powell. We

had decided on this location so they would feel no obligation, on top of their grief, to host

a first lady in their home. I invited them to come to the White House on Memorial Day.

George read the names of every man and woman who died in Iraq and wrote a

personal letter to each family. The stories of those who received Medal of Honor citations

deeply affected him. There was Sergeant First Class Paul Ray Smith, who after a surprise

Iraqi attack leapt aboard a damaged armored vehicle and, completely unprotected,

manned a fifty-caliber machine gun alone. He laid down his life for his friends and his

men, and his selfless bravery saved the lives of more than one hundred American

soldiers. There was Marine Corporal Jason Dunham, who played street soccer with Iraqi

kids and who, when a grenade was thrown by an Iraqi insurgent, jumped on the explosive

to save the lives of two other Americans. On a rooftop in the Iraqi city of Ramadi, Petty

Officer Michael Monsoor of the U.S. Navy did the same, flinging himself upon a grenade

to save two teammates.

Every day George read the casualty reports. He knew which military service, what

city or province, and how. It was heartbreaking. One night at dinner he was particularly

silent. Barbara and Jenna were there, teasing him, trying to get him to laugh. Eventually

he just got up and excused himself. I told them then that a packed military helicopter had

been shot down that morning over a field outside Baghdad.

But as George read the casualty reports, he read the threat reports too.

Just one week after I met with the Piestewa family, I was expected at an annual

Washington tradition, the Congressional Club First Lady's Luncheon, for the wives, and

occasionally the husbands, of senators and representatives. The luncheon is a fund-raiser

for the club and is designed to honor the first lady. It is a demanding event for the

organizers and the office of the honoree. Early in George's term, Hillary Clinton's former

White House chief of staff confided to my chief of staff, Andi Ball, that "each year, the

Congressional Club ladies made the Clinton staff cry."

Andi soon came to understand what she meant. In 2001 I had been told to walk on

an elevated catwalk, like a fashion runway, so that the nearly two thousand women

packed inside a giant hotel ballroom could catch a glimpse of me. As first lady I was

accustomed to doing almost anything, but this was a bit too much. In 2002 I politely

declined to do the runway. I also left the four-hour event a little early because Barbara

had to move out of her dorm that afternoon, and I wanted to rush up to New Haven to

help her. Indeed, it is rare for any first lady to stay for a four-hour-long luncheon. This

year the organizers had started besieging my staff in February: they had specific requests

for my remarks; they insisted that I stay for the entire lunch; and they wanted me to walk

the runway again. The constant back-and-forth for these luncheons invariably, as with

Hillary Clinton's staff, reduced one of the women in my office to tears.

But we admired and appreciated the enormous complexity of putting on such a

large event, and at the lunch itself, the congressional spouses went out of their way to

make me feel welcome. They invited singers they thought I would like, including

Wynonna Judd. One year they even named a perfume for me and had tiny bottles of the

scent waiting at each place setting as luncheon favors. There were other moments of

genuine fun with the congressional spouses. I always looked forward to the smaller and

more intimate annual Senate Spouses Lunch. Karyn Frist, wife of former Senate majority

leader Bill Frist; Kathy Gregg, Senator Judd Gregg's wife; and Tricia Lott, wife of former

Senate majority leader Trent Lott, were three of my closest friends in Washington. The

Senate spouses, Republicans and Democrats, created special events for me each year.

Once they surprised me with a re-creation of my first classroom, at Longfellow

Elementary. Another year we ate at tables under the glass ceilings of the U.S. Botanic

Garden, surrounded by exotic plants.

But while the Senate Spouses Lunch, at roughly one hundred, is a friendly,

personal gathering, events held for the entire Congress instantly passed the one thousand

mark: 535 elected officials, each with one invited guest. In sheer numbers, entertaining

the Congress was one of the biggest challenges the White House Social Office faced, and

we always looked for engaging ways to entertain the congressional multitudes. There are

two events designed for the full Congress each year. The first is the Congressional Picnic,

for all the members and their families, and the second is the Congressional Ball, held in

December, for the members and their spouses. Every year the Social Office began

working months in advance to develop a suitably exciting picnic theme that would honor

different parts of the United States. One year it was cowboys, with pony rides for the

small children. Another year, it was Mardi Gras, with a horse-drawn carriage on the

White House drive and Paul Prudhomme as our celebrity chef, cooking up New Orleans

fare. In 2006 the social secretary, Lea Berman, organized mini-Broadway musical

numbers inside a large tent on the South Lawn, televised by PBS. In 2008 we borrowed a

miniature train for the kids to ride. Beyond the numbers, though, there were other

challenges that tested the patience of every social secretary and her staff.

Each year the social secretary's office would report that there were members who

would not RSVP to the picnic, no matter how often White House staff called their offices

to see if they were coming. Other members would call the Social Office and insist upon

bringing more people, or they would arrive at the gate with eight interns in tow and

expect to be cleared immediately, producing an outcry from the Secret Service, which

required everyone's Social Security number days in advance in order to be admitted

inside the White House grounds.

Occasionally the White House Social Office would find itself attempting to save

members from themselves. At one picnic a member of the House leadership got drunk

and threw up in the bushes. The social staff tried to maneuver him away from the nearby

press pool. Alcohol is no stranger to some members of Congress. Social Office staffers

were waiting to greet another member when he arrived at the White House. When his

driver pulled to a stop, the man, who was already tipsy, took a swig of something and

then proceeded to hop out of his car and teeter over to spit it into the bushes. It was

mouthwash, presumably to mask whatever he had imbibed before.

The Congressional Ball, the largest event of the holiday season, was a substantial

undertaking and often an adventure. It was held on a Monday night, always the night

after the Kennedy Center Honors. The receiving line for photos lasted for three solid

hours. Some senators and representatives wanted to bring additional guests, even their

entire families, although the ball numbers already topped one thousand guests and the

event was spread over every inch of two full floors of the White House.

Rather than just an outsize buffet, we worked to make the ball a real party.

Downstairs was quieter and more reserved, but on the State Floor we had music and

dancing. We searched the country for great, unusual bands, beginning with Rotel and the

Hot Tomatoes in 2001. At every ball, by midnight, there would be sixty or more hardened

partygoers still dancing, and more than once the staff had to intervene to prevent a conga

line of senators and representatives from parading up the marble stairs to the private

residence, where George and I were already in bed.

We invited members of Congress to the White House residence all the time, and

these smaller events produced many memorable, laughter-filled evenings. We hosted

cocktail parties for Republicans and Democrats in our private living room. When Nancy

Pelosi became the House Speaker, George and I invited her and her husband, Paul, to

dinner, just the four of us, in the residence dining room. Numerous times, when

representatives or senators and their spouses arrived, my staff would hear them say as

they rode the elevator, "I can't believe I'm going up here." One senator's wife wanted to

take pictures of everything in the White House, even the basement kitchen, with racks of

raw chicken waiting to be roasted in the oven.

On May 22, the Japanese prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, came to visit us at

the ranch. Koizumi had been one of the first world leaders to offer aid and assistance to

the United States after 9-11, and he and George developed a close friendship. It was all

the more remarkable because their two fathers had fought against each other in World

War II. Indeed, in 1946, the year George and I were born, no one could have imagined

that Japan would become one of our most steadfast international allies. During the war

George's dad had been a naval aviator. In 1944 his plane had been forced down by enemy

fire in a bombing raid on Japanese military installations; Gampy had survived by ejecting

and parachuting into the Pacific. That same year Koizumi's father had worked to build an

airfield for kamikaze pilots taking off to crash into American ships and carriers. Koizumi

himself had been born in 1942, at the height of the war, when American forces were in

retreat across Asia. And now, in a true historical irony, the sons of former enemies had

become close friends. There is a comforting aspect to seeing history unfold in that

manner and to knowing that the world can, in fact, change. After American and coalition

forces entered Iraq, Koizumi later volunteered to deploy Japan's Self-Defense Forces in

support of the mission, the first overseas deployment of Japanese troops since World War

II.

When he arrived in Crawford, Koizumi and George walked out to our pool and

sat side by side, talking for two hours. That kind of conversation, the personal give-andtake, was difficult to have inside the White House, with a legion of staff or formal seating

arrangements. The following afternoon we had a cookout with hamburgers made from

Texas beef. When I next saw the Japanese prime minister, he raised his arm and made a

muscle, telling me, "That hamburger made me strong. I went home to do political battle,

and I was strong because of that hamburger."

The 2003 G8 Summit was again held on a remote mountain. This time, the

location was Evian, France. Before the summit opened, George traveled to Poland and

then Russia to meet Vladimir Putin; for that leg of the trip, I joined him. In Poland we

made a special visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the infamous Nazi death camp. George and I

quietly walked along the train tracks that had carried carloads of human beings, piled on

top of each other, without light or fresh air. I laid a single red rose at the terminus, where

men, women, and children began to be herded left or right, to the gas chambers or to the

labor camp, to work first and then die. We passed the barracks and the crematoriums, and

I tried to imagine a blue sky that had once been covered over, black and gray, with

human ash. "The inconvenient smell of smoke" was how one Nazi officer, who had gone

free, later described it.

As I walked, I realized there are things that textbooks, photographs, or even

graying documentary footage cannot teach. They cannot teach you how to feel when you

see prayer shawls or baby shoes left by children torn from their mothers, or prison cells

with the scratch marks of attempted escape. And I wept when I saw the thousands of

eyeglasses, their lenses still smudged with tears and dirt. I, who would be nearly blind

without glasses or contacts, could suddenly imagine people being driven into terror, with

no way to see, groping about with their hands. And then there was the larger blindness, of

the people who lived around the camps and around the world, of all of those who refused

to see what was happening.

I thought too of Saddam Hussein, who had said how much he admired Adolf

Hitler.

We waited for news out of Iraq. Some of it was positive and historic; we watched

Iraqi citizens pull down statues of Saddam as people in the old Soviet Union and the

Baltic nations had done to the images of Lenin and Stalin after the fall of communism.

We heard reports of the Iraqis' joy at being able to speak freely for the first time in

decades and to no longer live under the shadow of fear of Saddam and his henchmen. In

some neighborhoods, Iraqi children trailed after American soldiers, staring in wonder at

gifts of candy and crayons. But there were other disturbing signs. Museums and stores

were looted. In sections of major urban areas, there was no rule of law. And there were

attacks on our soldiers. At first, they were scattered incidents, a stray bomb or an errant

shooter. But over the months the violence escalated. And no one was certain if the people

behind it were disgruntled Ba'athists, the closest associates of Saddam, who had gone

underground, or if they were Iranian-backed terrorists, or al Qaeda recruits. What we

knew was American troops were under fire in a new kind of insurgent war.

In late September, after we had marked the second tearful anniversary of 9-11, I

traveled to Paris as America's representative to the official ceremonies marking the

United States' reentry after a nineteen-year absence into UNESCO, the United Nations'

leading cultural and educational institution. The United States had withdrawn from

UNESCO in 1984 to protest corruption and bias in the organization, but in the

intervening years and with the end of the Cold War, UNESCO had made substantial

efforts to reform, particularly under the leadership of its last director-general, the

Japanese diplomat Koichiro Matsuura. Among its new missions were global literacy and

addressing the serious lack of education in the developing world.

I also made a "social call" to President Jacques Chirac, who had been fiercely

opposed to the Iraq War. In full view of the assembled photographers, he greeted me by

bending over to kiss my hand, and the photo was beamed around the world. When he

raised his head, he told me, "Let bygones be bygones."

From Paris I jetted to Moscow to attend Lyudmila Putina's first book festival,

which was devoted to children's literature. The Russian press called it the "Festival of

School Libraries." When Lyudmila invited me, she asked that I bring along several

American children's book authors. I selected two writers whose books were among the

few American children's books that had been translated into Russian, R. L. Stine of

Goosebumps fame, whose own ancestors had emigrated from Russia looking for freedom

in America, and the teen thriller writer Peter Lerangis. Rounding out our delegation was

Marc Brown, best known for his chapter books about Arthur the aardvark. At the festival

R. L. Stine helped Russian children write a scary story about a boy named Mark and his

father's ghostly car. With Marc Brown drawing on a giant paper wall, the Russian

children "created" a make-believe creature built from all different parts of the animal

kingdom and invented a fairy tale. To the assembled school librarians and other invitees,

I spoke about the need for families to turn off the television and read, and confessed my

fondness for scary stories and mysteries and also Harry Potter. I added that to celebrate

books is to celebrate freedom as much as it is to have fun.

Vladimir Putin joined us for lunch afterward, and he told me, "I heard your

speech, and I saw that you had to mention freedom."

Lyudmila was particularly proud that her first book festival was what she called

"legitimate." The attendees, nearly all women, were school librarians who had been

selected to come to Moscow through an essay contest. They were not there because of

family or party connections; none was, as Lyudmila put it, "a provincial governor's sisterin-law." Both Lyudmila and I very much agreed about the importance of education, and

how difficult it is for books to compete with television, computers, and video games. The

final night I was there, Lyudmila hosted a beautiful performance of the ballet *Don*

Quixote at Moscow's enchanting Bolshoi Theatre.

In Washington, on Saturday, October 4, I hosted the third National Book Festival

and then, two days later, a state dinner for the president and first lady of Kenya, Mwai

and Lucy Kibaki. On October 10, at a speech in downtown Washington to the National

Association of Women Judges, I was thrilled to tell them that Shirin Ebadi, the first

female judge in Iran, had won the Nobel Peace Prize. "There can be no justice in the

world," I told them, "unless every woman has equal rights." It saddens me that, in the

twenty-first century, this point is one that still needs to be made. I think of our own lives

and then of the lives of the women in Afghanistan and in Iraq. That day I spoke to the

judges about how Iraqi women who came under political suspicion were "tortured, or

raped, or beheaded. Some of Saddam's militiamen carried ID cards listing their official

assignment as 'violation of women's honor.' Iraqi men were allowed to kill female

relatives for supposed slights to the family name." By 2003, three out of four women in

Iraq could not read. Over 60 percent of all Iraqi adults were illiterate. For the literate,

Saddam had also succeeded in banning many of Iraq's best writers and poets. Free speech

was nonexistent; the Iraqi secret police were known to sit in classrooms to monitor what

was studied and what was said. By contrast, American soldiers solicited donations of

school supplies from their friends and families for Iraqi children.

We can and should debate all American wars, but can anyone truly say that the

world was a better place and Iraq a better nation with Saddam Hussein in power? Or that

it would not have become a full-fledged terrorist haven? And then there are the

unanswerables. What, for instance, would the world have said if, in 1999, the United

States had invaded Afghanistan? But had we done so, might the World Trade Center be

standing today, its offices and observation deck crowded? We will never know. The

world does not operate according to the principles of "what if?" All leaders make choices,

and no one can say for certain what would have happened had a different path been

taken. For myself, I prefer to stand against oppression, to stand, with George, for

freedom.

In late October I was in Asia with George, stopping in Japan, the Philippines, and

then Thailand, where we called on King Bhumibol Adulyadej and Queen Sirikit. During

our brief stay, I visited an AIDS treatment clinic and met a young girl, shunned by her

family, who came alone for her medicine. In Bali, Indonesia, the scene of a recent terror

bombing, the security was so tight that our delegation staff was not allowed to walk in

front of the buildings. Every entry, for us and for them, was through a back door. Ships

and submarines hovered off the coast.

Meanwhile, Great Britain was reeling from another kind of security breach when

we arrived in November for an official state visit. The tabloids went wild with revelations

that a reporter for the *Daily Mirror* had spent the last two months working as a "phony

footman" inside Buckingham Palace. Among his duties was serving breakfast to the

queen and Prince Philip; his last act before he resigned was to arrange fruit and

chocolates in the Belgian Suite, the rooms we would occupy on our four-day visit.

George and I were amazed at the idea of a tabloid spy, while my staff members were a bit

in awe of the palace, each having been assigned her very own lady-in-waiting.

We had a chance to explore Buckingham Palace, and the queen suggested that I

go with my staff to watch the preparations for the white-tie state dinner being given in

our honor. It was held in the palace's ballroom, which Queen Victoria unveiled in 1856 to

honor the end of the Crimean War. At one end is a massive dais with golden columns and

two royal thrones. We stood at the room's edge and watched as the royal staff walked on

top of the perfectly set tables in their stocking feet, measuring tapes in hand, to check that

each knife, fork, and spoon was perfectly placed at each setting.

After well over one thousand years of kings in England, there is a rare perfection

to royal events that is truly breathtaking. Even the queen's china is revered. I remember

the American ambassador to Liberia telling me the story of the British evacuation from

Monrovia in the 1990s, when Liberian rebel forces began advancing on the capital city.

As British diplomats prepared to abandon their cliff-side embassy, they opened the

ambassador's supply of champagne and announced that they must destroy the china. The

porcelain was too heavy to carry out, and it is against British law to allow the queen's

china to fall into enemy hands. With champagne flutes in one hand and plates and teacups

in the other, everyone stood on the balcony and hurled the pieces onto the cliffs below.

The royal family is not without its quirks. When Prince Charles and Camilla,

Duchess of Cornwall, came to visit us, they requested glasses of ice before we began a

long receiving line. The staff dutifully produced them, and the prince removed a flask

from his pocket and added to each a small splash of what I presume was straight gin, so

that they might be fortified before the hour or more of shaking hands.

The night of the royal state dinner for George and me at Buckingham Palace, I

donned a Carolina Herrera burgundy dress, a fitted velvet top over a tulle skirt. Barbara

Bush had loaned me the "Bush family jewels," diamonds and pearls. The next evening we

reciprocated the hospitality of the queen and Prince Philip with a dinner at the American

ambassador's residence, Winfield House, where the ambassador's dog roamed freely

through the room. He began barking as George stood to give his toast, and Cathy Fenton,

our social secretary, was left to scramble to scoop up the dog and remove him from the

room so he wouldn't howl or yap when the queen rose and lifted her glass. After dinner

Andrew Lloyd Webber and a small ensemble performed in honor of the queen. Our last

stop was Sedgefield, England, Tony Blair's childhood home and his longtime

parliamentary constituency, the British electors who placed him in Parliament. There we

dined at the Dun Cow Inn with some of the Blairs' oldest friends.

The following week was Thanksgiving, which we were to spend at the ranch with

Bar and Gampy and Barbara and Jenna, but for weeks I had known that George would

likely miss our family feast. He was making a surprise visit to Baghdad to see the troops.

I knew the exact moment he was supposed to land, and I immediately turned on the

television to wait for the news. An hour passed. Then two hours. Still there was no film

footage, no live feed. Late in the morning, I called the Secret Service agents' outpost on

the ranch and asked, "Where's the president?" The agent in charge replied, "We show him

in the ranch house, ma'am." I quickly said, "Oh, I'll go look again." The Baghdad trip was

so secretive that even our own agents didn't know where George was. Condi Rice's Secret

Service detail had spent the entire night in a car, with the motor running, outside our little

clapboard house, where she usually stayed when she was in Crawford. They had no idea

that she was on her way to Baghdad. A commercial plane in the sky that glimpsed Air

Force One was told it was mistaken. When I did finally see the footage of George on

television, I called Lisa Gottesman, the mother of George's personal aide, Blake. He was

in Iraq, serving the troops from the chow line, alongside the president. I told her to turn

on the television and see her son. She was in her kitchen making Thanksgiving dinner.

When she looked at the screen, she burst into tears. Not because she was scared but

because she was so proud of her son for having gone with George.

Our soldiers were thrilled to see George, who served a bunch of them supper in

the chow line, visited, and ate a Thanksgiving meal. But it was he who was most grateful.

His was a small gesture. Their service, every day, was the large one.

The December season was subdued that year. Every White House has had parties,

even in wartime. The Lincolns hosted gatherings that lasted until the early hours of the

morning. Eleanor Roosevelt installed an elaborate swing set on the White House grounds

for her granddaughter's sixth birthday in 1933, during the height of the Great Depression.

Lyndon Johnson ended the cycle of mourning for John F. Kennedy with a spur-of-the-

moment decision to invite Congress over for a Christmas party. Layers of black crepe

were removed and evergreens and poinsettias placed around the house. The kitchen

rushed to prepare food and, at Johnson's request, mixed gallons of spiked punch.

This year we knew that, in many homes, families were missing a father or a

mother, a son or a daughter, who was fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan. We held our annual

children's party for military children who lived in or near Washington. Roland Mesnier,

the pastry chef, displayed his cake-making skills, entertaining them with fabulous sweet

creations. For our holiday theme, I chose "A Season of Stories," featuring favorite

timeless storybook characters. The White House Christmas tree was decorated with

storybook character ornaments that my mother-in-law had used over a decade before.

There is great pleasure to be had in giving new life to old ornaments, just as many

families over the generations do on their own trees. To adorn our annual card, I chose an

image of the Diplomatic Reception Room, with a warming fire and George Washington

above the mantel, painted by artist Barbara Prey. Our verse came from the book of Job:

"You have granted me life and loving kindness; and your care has preserved my spirit."

On December 13, a grimy, unkempt Saddam Hussein was found hiding in a hole

in his hometown of Tikrit. We had hope, but we were wary. Next year, 2004, would be

another year of war abroad. At home, it was a presidential election year.

There would be no other political races after this one. Ten years after George had

sought the Texas governorship, he would be running in his last election, this time for a

second term as president. Come January of 2005, we would either be leaving or have four

final years to serve. Some call serving in the White House a "burden" or a "sacrifice."

The presidency can be, at moments, difficult, and in exchange for the enormous privilege

of holding the office, you give up your privacy for a lifetime. But I believe it is a deep

honor to be given the trust of the American people. For George and for me, it was a

constant blessing to have the opportunity to witness, so often, the very best of America. I

enjoyed this last campaign, with its enormous rallies and the chance to once again

crisscross the country. I am grateful too to the tens of thousands of people who came out

and cheered, to those who waited for hours to shake our hands on the rope lines and who

said, "We are praying for you." I took strength and solace from their words.

Spot, our beloved springer spaniel, died that winter. I was away when she suffered

a stroke. The only humane thing to do was put her to sleep, but George waited for me to

return, so that I too would have a chance to say good-bye. The evening before Spot was

going to be put down, George lovingly carried her out to the South Lawn, on whose lush

grass she had rolled as a puppy and where, even as an old girl, she loved to chase after

balls. George laid her down and then got down on the grass himself, encircling her in the

chill dusk with the warmth of his body and gently stroking her head for a final farewell.

Spot had been born in the White House to Bar's dog, Millie. She was the only dog to live

and die in the White House, with two different presidents.

There was more private sadness to come.

On Valentine's Day, I hosted a dinner for some of our old friends from Midland in

the Red Room. It was a dinner for Cathie Blackaller, my old next-door neighbor from

Hughes Street, who was dying of metastatic breast cancer. On New Year's Day in Austin,

Regan Gammon, Peggy and Ronnie Weiss, Cathie, and I had met for brunch. I told them

that I wanted to do a mini-Midland reunion at the White House for a few friends, and

Cathie, who used to sneak around outside with me in our pajamas on sleepover nights

back when we were teenagers, said, "Why don't you do it sooner rather than later?" I

heard her words, and I organized it for Valentine's Day. There were fourteen of us,

including Mike Proctor, George's childhood friend. Cathie came in a wheelchair, with her

scalp wrapped in a scarf, and Ronnie pushed her around. I seated her next to George, who

kept her laughing all evening. That weekend we went to art galleries and enjoyed

Washington. It was to be our last visit. Cathie died in April, at fifty-eight years old.

On April 28, CBS News' *60 Minutes II* broadcast the first images from a prison

named Abu Ghraib outside Baghdad. They showed naked Iraqi prisoners being subjected

to disgusting and degrading abuse by the American soldiers assigned to guard them. A

New Yorker magazine article followed two days later with more gruesome images. I

remember sitting with George over dinner as we did many nights upstairs in the White

House, just the two of us, talking. George was nearly physically sick to think that any

American troops could have behaved in this manner. He was angry too. "Laura," he said,

"I have to know how this was ever allowed to happen and to make sure that it never

happens again." There are times when the system of command fails, when soldiers fail

their junior officers, when junior officers fail their senior officers, and when senior

officers and their layers of civilian leadership at the Defense Department fail. Tens if not

hundreds of people in authority across the system had not looked hard enough, had not

done their duty. Suddenly the sacrifice, character, and hard work of more than 100,000

American troops in Iraq was being jeopardized by a few deranged men and women. It

sickened and devastated both of us.

After two years of meeting on mountaintops, in 2004 the G8 came to the United

States. George and I chose to host the leaders of the world's largest economies on Sea

Island, Georgia. I invited the presidents' and prime ministers' wives--including Cherie

Blair, Lyudmila Putina, Bernadette Chirac of France, and Sheila Martin of Canada--and

created a special program for them. Later G8 meetings would do the same; in Germany,

Angela Merkel's husband, Professor Joachim Sauer, put together a seminar on G8

population demographics for visiting spouses.

I took our group of wives bird-watching along a deserted beach, although they

were most interested in seeing an alligator that made its home on the island's golf course.

Lyudmila went swimming several times in the Atlantic's churning waves. The spouses'

"work session" featured a roundtable and luncheon to which I invited Dr. Habiba Sarabi,

the minister of women's affairs in Afghanistan; and two Iraqi women, the minister of

displacement and migration and an Iraqi Fulbright scholar; as well as Paula Nirschel, the

wife of the president of Roger Williams University in Rhode Island. Paula had become

galvanized by the plight of Afghan women, and in January of 2002, she woke in the

middle of the night with an idea, to start scholarships for Afghan women at U.S.

universities. Within two years, eleven women from Afghanistan were studying in the

United States on full scholarships, and Paula had raised the money to cover their

incidental expenses. At the summit's conclusion, Bernadette Chirac told us that France

would build a maternity hospital for women in Afghanistan.

That spring Jenna and Barbara graduated from college, one day apart. We headed

first to Austin for a celebratory dinner with Mother, Regan and Billy Gammon, and

Jenna's friends at a local restaurant. The next night we were in New Haven, celebrating

Barbara's graduation with a party at Dean Richard Brodhead's house--he was a friend and

former classmate of George's. The only damper on the celebrations was George's nose,

which he had scraped when his bike tire hit some loose soil and he toppled over. In all

our photos, he is sporting a perfectly placed red mark. By the end of May, for the first

time in four years, our girls came home to live.

A couple of months before school ended, Jenna had written a heartfelt letter to her

dad, saying that she wanted to work for him in this, his final political race. She told

George that she was tired of "hearing lies about you," and she wanted to help others to

see "the Dad I love." Both Jenna and Barbara signed on with the Bush-Cheney campaign.

It was, they said, their first campaign and also their last chance to volunteer for their dad.

They answered phones in the headquarters and flew with us to campaign stops. By the

fall the girls were going out and giving speeches on their own. We had the magic of

watching the race unfold through their eyes. The constant rush of a full-throttle

presidential campaign was new for them. They had been little girls when Gampy ran;

they had been college freshmen, adjusting to their new, independent lives during

George's first White House race. Now they would tear up when crowds of ten or twenty

thousand roared in support of their dad.

Their friends came too. Many from Yale and the University of Texas moved to

Washington to help on the campaign. Barbara would get e-mails from college friends

with whom she had never discussed politics. They wrote, "I'm in New Hampshire" or "In

New Jersey, campaigning for your dad."

I was so proud of the young women Barbara and Jenna had become, and to see

how much they wanted to help their father. Both of them knew the world that was visited

on presidential children. They had experienced its many privileges, the thrills of foreign

travel, the glamour of meeting heads of state. But there are sacrifices as well, starting

with the heightened scrutiny of their own lives. A few times they had strangers accost

them on the street and scream profanity-laced epithets about their father and their family.

They did not tell me about it when it happened, only much later. They knew the strains

that George was under; they wanted to protect us. I would not wish what was said to them

on any presidential child, or the child of any candidate for public office. But I fear that

we have crossed a personal boundary in American political life, a boundary that we may

not be able to recross. And the first crossing of that boundary began in the final month of

the 2004 campaign.

The 2000 and 2004 national campaigns had a dividing line question. It was

invariably a question on a social issue where the press made a concerted effort to find

places where my views might diverge from my husband's. During the 2000 race, the

media questions usually led, in various guises, back to the issue of abortion. Lisa Myers

of NBC was the first to raise it, in the summer of 2000. The day before the 2001

inauguration, Katie Couric went further: Did I want *Roe v. Wade* to be "overturned"?

Hillary Clinton had been outspoken about White House policy and often

commented on political decisions and politics. For eight years she had been a highly

visible advocate in her husband's administration, so there was a belief on the part of the

media that, even though I was not an elected official, they were entitled to ask me about

policy, and also a curiosity about whether I would weigh in on policy with George. There

was, from the start, a desire by some in the press and many of the pundits to discover any

points of disagreement between us. It was an odd sort of Washington parlor game; I

should have recognized it when I got the very first abortion query.

I knew the *Roe v. Wade* question was coming; Katie had already asked me two

other questions about abortion in the minute before. I thought of Barbara's and Jenna's

shock when, as young girls, they first learned what abortion is. They knew how much

George and I had longed for children, how much they were wanted. Talking with them

around our small kitchen table, I, who had come of age during the bitter fights over *Roe*

v. Wade, was also a bit shocked at their surprise and disbelief.

On the issue of abortion, I have always been struck by the deep divide between

the sides. And how rarely the alternative of adoption is raised. We have so many friends

and family members who found their children through adoption; George and I were fully

expecting to be one of those couples as well. Today, for women in their twenties, thirties,

and forties, infertility is the issue that is the most personal to them; it is the private

struggle that breaks their hearts.

We are a nation of different generations and beliefs, seeing issues through

different eras and different eyes. While cherishing life, I have always believed that

abortion is a private decision, and there, no one can walk in anyone else's shoes.

When Katie Couric raised the issue of *Roe v. Wade*, I knew George's views, and I

knew what the federal law is. I also knew the religious objections and the personal

anguish of women on both sides. The simplest interpretation of her question was, Did I,

as an incoming first lady, want to start off my husband's term by declaring that an

existing Supreme Court ruling should be overturned? But the issue is so much more

complex than that. Those were the split-second thoughts that filtered through my mind.

Finally, to the question Did I think *Roe v. Wade* should be overturned? I answered no,

and of course, that one word became the lead headline.

In 2004 the social question that animated the campaign was gay marriage. Before

the election season had unfolded, I had talked to George about not making gay marriage a

significant issue. We have, I reminded him, a number of close friends who are gay or

whose children are gay. But at that moment I could never have imagined what path this

issue would take and where it would lead.

Over twenty-four years, I had been at every Republican convention: Detroit,

Dallas, New Orleans, Houston, San Diego, Philadelphia, and now New York. Once again

the entire Bush family joined us, making it in part a mini-reunion of siblings, in-laws,

cousins, and children and grandchildren. The Republican National Committee had chosen

New York as its site in part to make a defiant stand against the terrorists. They wanted to

show the world that the city had rebounded and that political leaders were not afraid to

pack the hotels and eat in the restaurants. Being in the city reminded me how completely

our country came together after 9-11, when for a time personal passions were put aside

and we had a common care and a common purpose. Now I began to feel the country

separating along new seams.

The campaign was highly personal for me in other ways too. In addition to my

girls, I traveled with some of the families who had lost their loved ones on the morning of

9-11. Cheryl McGuinness, the widow of the copilot Tom McGuinness, whose hijacked

plane had been flown into the World Trade Center, campaigned with me, as did David

Beamer, father of Todd Beamer, one of the heroes of Flight 93. They did not, in the heat

of a campaign, want the threat of terrorism to be forgotten.

Amid the rallies, speeches, and debates, George and I never forgot the sacrifice of

our own troops at war. On almost every swing across the United States, George met with

families who had lost sons or daughters, husbands or wives, or fathers or mothers in Iraq

and Afghanistan. Many times I joined him; sometimes I visited with the families on my

own. We met in stadium holding rooms and also on nearby military bases, any location

that would give us a bit of privacy. We were there to thank and comfort them, to make

sure that they were getting everything they needed from the Department of Defense or

Veterans Affairs. But mostly we came to listen. Many of the families would show us

photos, would tell us stories of the loved ones they had lost. They talked about a son's

favorite sports teams, what position a daughter had played in high school. They talked

about a brother's hobbies or pets, what a husband had said when he held his newborn son

or daughter for the first time. They wanted us to know their loved ones as living people

and to know the warmth and value of their lives. And I was struck by how similar their

losses were to the losses of the families of 9-11. We came away humbled by these

families' courage and sacrifice. There is no compensation for such a loss; we carried their

stories in our hearts.

The same was true of our visits to the wounded at Walter Reed, Bethesda Naval,

and Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. We would see soldiers and Marines

who had lost limbs and were asking to return to duty. We saw their spouses and small

children clustered around their bedsides, and middle-aged mothers who had left their jobs

and driven across half the country or flown from home with little more than the clothes

on their backs to rush to the hospital and be there for their injured sons or daughters. We

saw the hideous burns of IED bombs, and soldiers and Marines whose brains had been

damaged beyond full repair. We saw their suffering. And I always knew when George

had gone alone to visit the wounded or the families of the fallen. He was quiet, a

deafening kind of quiet. And the grief shone in his eyes.

The last presidential debate of the 2004 election was held in Tempe, Arizona, on

October 13 and was moderated by Bob Schieffer of CBS News. Bob is from Texas and

has always been a straight shooter. His brother, Tom, a Democrat, had been one of our

partners in the Texas Rangers, and George named him ambassador to Australia and later

to Japan.

I was nervous before this debate, just as I was before every debate. Senator John

McCain and his wife, Cindy, were with us in the holding area. The night before, for a

brief respite, they had taken us to their favorite Mexican restaurant in Phoenix.

When George sat down to collect his thoughts, John, meaning well, went over and

said, "Relax. Relax," which of course I knew would most likely distract George and make

him anything but relaxed. George walked out onto the stage in a dark suit, white shirt,

and red tie. John Kerry was wearing the same thing, except a slightly darker red tie. It

was as if they had read the same handbook, what to wear to a debate. Jenna and Barbara

were sitting on either side of me. We all heard Bob say, "Both of you are opposed to gay

marriage. But to understand how you have come to that conclusion, I want to ask you a

more basic question. Do you believe homosexuality is a choice?" John Kerry began his

answer by saying, "I think if you were to ask Dick Cheney's daughter, who is a lesbian,

she would tell you that she's being who she was, she's being who she was born as."

Beside me, Jenna and Barbara gasped. They were utterly stunned that a candidate would

use an opponent's child in a debate. John Kerry's statement did not seem like some offthe-cuff remark. His running mate, John Edwards, had also mentioned Mary during his

vice presidential debate with Dick Cheney, the week before. Lynne Cheney was rightly

furious to see her daughter be used by these men in a calculated attempt to score political

points. Lynne called it "cheap and tawdry," and it was.

Seven days later I was the one in the campaign spotlight. In a brief interview,

Teresa Heinz Kerry was asked by *USA Today* if she would be different from me as first

lady. These are the trick questions of politics. They may seem benign coming off a

reporter's lips, but they are minefields for whoever answers. Teresa began by saying,

"Well, you know, I don't know Laura Bush. But she seems to be calm, and she has a

sparkle in her, which is good." Had she ended at that sentence, there would have been no

headline. But instead she continued, "But I don't know that she's ever had a real job--I

mean since she's been a grown-up." Of course, Teresa had no idea that I had worked as a

teacher and a librarian from 1968 until I married George, in November of 1977. Her

husband's campaign issued an apology the same day. I was never offended. But from then

on, at political rallies, I would see women holding signs: "I never did anything either, I'm

a teacher" or "I don't do anything either, I'm a librarian."

Although the network news exit polls predicted that John Kerry would win, they

were wrong once again. George and Dick Cheney won reelection by over 3 million votes.

In those months together out on the trail, we grew even closer as a family. And

the 2004 race would ultimately add to our little foursome. During the campaign Jenna

met another campaign aide, a young man from Virginia named Henry Hager. In May of

2008, they would marry under a sunset sky by the little lake at our ranch.

When Bill and Hillary Clinton entered the White House, *Saturday Night Live*

debuted a few particularly cruel skits aimed at their then twelve-year-old daughter,

Chelsea. The Clintons took a hard line, and the press was shamed into leaving Chelsea

alone. The press did largely the same for Barbara and Jenna, although reporters from the

tabloids and from more mainstream publications frequently called their friends, trying to

entice them to talk about the girls. None ever did. But a postscript to the 2004 campaign

was that it changed, perhaps irrevocably, how the families, especially the children, of

national candidates are treated. The strategy of making Mary Cheney's private life an

issue failed with the voters in November of 2004. But in the years since, it has become

acceptable to mock candidates and their families, and other elected officeholders, in

highly personal ways; David Letterman feels free to ridicule Sarah Palin's teenage

daughters, and the audience laughs. That is the legacy of the 2004 campaign.

For the holidays that year, I chose the theme of seasonal music, and scattered

across the White House we had scenes depicting our favorite songs, from "Frosty the

Snowman" to "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus." In the front hallway, we created our

own winter wonderland of snow-flecked trees with glittering icicle lights, a look that

Nancy Reagan from sunny California had also loved. The Secret Service allowed us to

resume tours, and some 44,000 people were able to come through the house to see the

decorations. We hosted another 9,000 guests for the receptions, among them many

military children and personnel.

We were at Camp David for Christmas Day when, deep under the Indian Ocean

floor, the tectonic plates shuddered and the seabed cracked in the second largest

earthquake in recorded history.

The entire planet vibrated from its force. Above, in the seawater, the energy from

the quake unleashed a series of waves. The water began rushing toward shore, traveling

as fast as an airplane, at speeds of some five hundred miles per hour. Off the coastline the

pace of the water gradually slowed. Its power changed from speed to height, until it

formed a wall of water that was in some places more than ten stories tall. In Thailand

people on the beach saw the ocean race back, sucked into the tidal force of the wave.

Then the water rushed forward. When it reached land, it crashed with the force of a small

nuclear explosion. The tsunami was as high as one hundred feet, and it devastated not just

southern Asia but the East African coast as well. Ultimately, more than 200,000 people in

fourteen countries were killed. Thousands were drowned; many were sucked into the

giant undertow and washed away. George and I watched the early television footage in

horror, and he immediately asked his father and Bill Clinton to spearhead a fund-raising

and relief effort in the United States. American citizens contributed more than $1.8

billion, and the U.S. government dispatched a total of $841 million in aid. Day after day

we heard the stories of devastation: villages where only a few residents remained alive,

survivors who clung to palm trees and waited with broken legs and arms, husbands and

wives, parents and children of whom one remained and one was swept away.

There were no early warning systems for tsunamis in the Indian Ocean, just as

there are none for earthquakes. But for other natural disasters, we could be confident that

warnings could go out hours or even days before they arrived at our shores. In 2004

alone, four hurricanes had hit Florida in a period of six weeks. Two were Category 3

hurricanes, and one was a Category 4, the worst storm to arrive on the U.S. mainland

since 1992. Forty-five people in six states died as a direct result of those four storms.

Always, though, most of the people in their paths had fled to safety.

On January 6, George and I held a black-tie sixtieth-anniversary dinner for Ganny

and Gampy. We had begun preparations for it before the election, not knowing if we

would be packing to leave the White House or planning to stay. The singing Army

Chorus performed, led by the moving bass singer, Alvy Powell, and we toasted Bar and

Gampy's extraordinary marriage. One of their longtime friends, David Rubenstein, raised

his glass and noted that Barbara and George Bush were the first presidential couple to

reach the milestone of sixty years of shared life.

On her visit Bar also replaced her official White House portrait. She had never

liked the image that had been painted of her; she and I both thought that it was flat and

dull. When Bar mentioned this to the head White House usher, Gary Walters, he said

with characteristic pragmatism, "Why don't you do something about it?" So Bar had a

second portrait painted, and this one did capture her sparkle and wit. We proudly watched

as her new and improved portrait was hung, proving that even first ladies can have a

second act after they have supposedly been "immortalized."

Inauguration Day 2005 dawned cold and snowy. A light dusting fell over the

Capitol, coating the dull winter grass in white. By the time George stepped onto the

platform, a dazzling sun had broken through, but the air was still cold. Gampy spent the

afternoon in a White House tub, trying to warm up. I later heard that the German

ambassador, a big fan of Alpine skiing, described that morning, sitting in the shady

section for diplomats, as "the coldest I have ever felt." I felt the cold too, but I was

focused on George's words. His second inaugural address was a stirring discussion of

freedom, not our unique American vision of freedom but the concept of freedom at its

most fundamental. "America," he said, "will not pretend that jailed dissidents prefer their

chains, or that women welcome humiliation and servitude, or that any human being

aspires to live at the mercy of bullies."

He spoke of our own nation: "You have seen that life is fragile, and evil is real,

and courage triumphs. Make the choice to serve in a cause larger than your wants, larger

than yourself--and in your days you will add not just to the wealth of our country, but to

its character."

George believes in the capacity of human beings to change their lives and the

lives of others for the better. He believes in the generosity of the human spirit. And he

believes that everyone, no matter what his or her circumstances, deserves a chance. I

believe it as well. His inaugural words and ideals would inspire me in the four years to

come.

My mother missed the family inaugural portrait. When I went to her room to get

her, she was standing out in the hallway, not fully dressed, with rollers still in her hair. I

knew at that moment that I should have had someone with her the whole time; the

independent, confident woman who had been at the 2001 inauguration was gone. Travel

was hard for her. She could no longer get on or off the plane unassisted. She visited less

frequently during our second term, and when she came, my longtime Midland friend

Elaine Magruder accompanied her.

In April of 2004, before the campaign had kicked into high gear, I'd cleared my

schedule and gone home to Midland to help Mother move out of the last house that

Daddy had built for her. Together, Mother and I packed up her belongings. As an only

child, had I waited, I would have been doing it alone. We laughed over what we found in

boxes or in closets. She moved her best things into her apartment in her new retirement

home. The rest we gave away or I sent to Crawford. Mother was still thrifty too, cutting

down "perfectly good" draperies to fit in her new, small living room. We hung her

pictures on the walls and arranged her dwindling collection of furniture for what I knew

would be the last time.

Two months later I was reminded again of the passage of time when President

Ronald Reagan died and we sat with Nancy Reagan in her grief. I listened to the words of

praise from many who had once mocked President Reagan. In the intervening years, they

had reassessed his life and his legacy. Now he was seen as the man who had stood up to

the Soviet Union and begun the end of the decades-long nuclear stalemate that was the

Cold War. In those June days following his death, Reagan was hailed as a great statesman

by many commentators, political opponents, and historians who had derided him during

his lifetime.

We had our own transition as 2005 dawned. A second Scottish terrier, two-monthold Miss Beazley, a relative of Barney's, joined us in the White House. George had a new

valet, Robert Favela, who grew up outside El Paso; the U.S. Navy had posted him to

work for George in the White House. In an amazing coincidence, Robert had joined the

Navy with his best friend, Carlos Medina. Carlos's parents owned the four-square orangebrick house in Canutillo that had been Grammee and Papa's home, where Grammee had

laid each brick by hand.

Condi Rice was departing the West Wing for the State Department, as secretary of

state. The new national security advisor, Stephen Hadley, is one of the nicest men I have

ever met. His even temperament, dedication, and unmatched sense of fairness and

balance made him a perfect advisor, and his compassion makes him a great person.

Inside the White House, Karl Rove was named deputy chief of staff. Karl had

been with us in the trenches of Republican politics for years. Not only did we respect his

thoughtful and intuitive understanding of the political world, but his interests spanned

well beyond vote counts and elections. As a person, Karl is funny and warm. He was

invaluable to George as an advisor and would remain one of our closest friends.

My chief of staff, Andi Ball, who had been with me for a decade, since our first

days in the Governor's Mansion and through the horrors of 9-11, and who had become a

treasured friend, was going home to her husband in Texas. Replacing her would be the

very talented Anita McBride, who had worked for Ronald Reagan and Gampy, and had

most recently been at the State Department. We had a new social secretary, Lea Berman,

a warm and gracious hostess; and I already had a second, sweet assistant, Lindsey

Lineweaver. My first, the always cheerful Sarah Moss, had departed before the campaign

and was now the married Sarah Garrison.

When I interviewed Anita, I told her there was one thing I wanted to do above all

else: I wanted to travel to Afghanistan.

I had wanted to go to Afghanistan for years. My regular meetings in the United

States with Afghan teachers and parliamentarians, lawyers and judges, as well as my

work with the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, had heightened my interest in seeing the

country for myself.

I had tried to visit in previous years, but there were either security concerns or

problems with planning. I did not want to divert vital military assets, such as helicopters

or security, from the battlefield to accommodate one of my trips. I did not want people in

our military to have to pay attention to me when they had other jobs and other duties. We

needed to pick an optimum time for our military, but I was eager to go.

All the trip planning was done in secret, in the Presidential Emergency Operations

Center, the same underground set of rooms where we had taken shelter on the evening of

9-11. A few representatives from the Secret Service and the White House Military Office

worked with Anita on the arrangements; as did Paula Dobriansky, undersecretary of state

for democracy and global affairs; and Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin. Andy Card,

George's chief of staff, had signed off on the trip, but on my staff, only Anita knew. The

trip was so classified that she couldn't tell her own husband.

We had decided that I would travel to the Afghan capital of Kabul on the day of

the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council meeting. The council, a unique public-private

partnership that George and Afghan president Hamid Karzai had established in 2002,

meets twice a year, once in Washington and once in Kabul. Through the council,

American women partner with women in Afghanistan to share their expertise in

education, business, politics, the law, and health care. Among its accomplishments the

council has provided opportunities for Afghan women to open businesses, secure an

education for themselves and their children, and begin to assume leadership roles inside

Afghanistan. This is a sea change in a nation where, under the Taliban, women who had

been widowed or left without fathers or brothers following years of war could not leave

the house because they had no male relative to accompany them.

Many of the security assets that I would need would already be in place for the

council's March meeting in Kabul. I could slip in under their cover. And that is exactly

what we did. The members of the press who would accompany me on this trip did not

know where we were going until thirty-six hours before our departure, and they were

sworn to secrecy. American members of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council were told

that I was coming only after their plane had finished a refueling stop in England.

My plane left Andrews Air Force Base at 10:15 in the morning. Traveling with

me were Anita; Margaret Spellings, the secretary of education; and Paula Dobriansky. To

reach Kabul we would cross nine and a half time zones in fourteen hours. We would land

at 11:35 a.m. local time at Bagram Airfield, our plane twisting like a corkscrew as we

descended to evade any rounds of insurgent gunfire. Waiting to greet me upon arrival

were a group of allied commanders from the United States, Germany, South Korea, New

Zealand, Pakistan, Poland, Australia, Egypt, Estonia, and France. All had troops on the

ground in Afghanistan.

I had a chance to personally thank the commanders before boarding a Nighthawk

helicopter. Blades churning, it lifted off for the thirty-minute ride to Kabul. In the

distance the Hindu Kush mountains rose, their pointed white snowcaps piercing the sky.

Below us stretched brown dust and flat building compounds made of rough mud brick.

Some looked like little more than stacked earth or ruins. I had the sense that I was flying

over a scene out of the Bible, gazing down upon an ancient civilization and the distant

footprint it had left behind.

Though we were far removed from shifting sands, the miles of ground looked like

a desert. Afghanistan had once been renowned for its grapes and pomegranates; its fruits

were favorite delicacies on the British ambassador's table in India. Remarkably, from my

window, I could not glimpse even a blade of green. What trees had not been destroyed in

the Russian invasion had been burned by the Afghans during the biting cold winters.

Now, for heat, they burned things like trash or tires, whatever they could find, whatever

would catch fire.

After years of war and Taliban rule, the country was decimated. Kabul was a shell

of bombed-out buildings. Very few people had electricity. Water was carried by hand.

Roads were collections of rubble. The country's physical infrastructure had been ruined,

and the social infrastructure was worse. The most basic laws governing contracts,

property rights, and business were absent in Afghanistan.

We had large scarves to cover our heads if needed, and while we flew, Anita and I

pulled up our scarves as a fine, choking dust swirled through the open doors of the

helicopter. The layers of dust that settled over us were far worse than the red sand that

engulfed Midland. Here, there was nothing, not even scrubby mesquite, to hold the soil to

the ground. The helicopter ride was like traveling in a wind tunnel, with the enormous

thump-thump of the blades above us and bracing, cold air racing past. Soldiers leaned out

of the doors and rear of the helicopter with their machine guns raised. These are the

conditions our troops travel in every day, risking their lives. There is no special

dispensation from either the elements or the insurgents; both are dangerous. The pilot

who so gently set down my enormous helicopter was killed two months later in a crash in

Iraq. Two of the crew chiefs were killed in a separate crash just a week later; their

helicopter was brought down by bad weather in Afghanistan's Ghazni Province. I wrote

to all three families. To Captain Derek Argel's widow, I penned, "Our nation has lost a

hero, but you and your son have lost your precious husband and father. My heart aches

for you."

Our destination was Kabul University, an austere, Soviet-style concrete building

that had been partly bombed out during the years of conflict. The United States had

renovated it to include dorm rooms and classrooms. In the yard outside, widows were

planting trees as part of a nationwide reforestation project funded by Caroline Firestone,

an American philanthropist and a member of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council.

My first stop was the Women's Teacher Training Institute, which I had helped

found in 2002. The program, overseen by the U.S. Agency for International

Development, is designed to train teachers from the rural provinces. After completing the

program, they return to their provinces to train other teachers. The idea was to create a

cascading effect, so that as many teachers as possible could be trained as quickly as

possible and more small villages could open their own schools. That spring the institute's

first class would be graduating. The institute trained both men and women, but they were

kept segregated, taught in separate classrooms.

When I entered the women's classroom, the women were sitting on the floor on

cushions, their backs propped against the wall and their papers spread across their laps.

The institute had few chairs or desks. Many of the women were completely covered in

blue burkas, and I was immediately struck by the sheer weight of the material. These

were small women, drowning in cloth, each forming a kind of triangle on the floor, as if

they were pinned to the ground. And they seemed afraid even to lift their mesh-covered

eyes and peer up at me. Perhaps they were wary of looking at me in my Western pantsuit,

with my uncovered face and hair. But these women were brave enough to leave their

homes and come to Kabul, to live in a dorm, go to school, study, and be trained. Two

Kabul University students showed me the dorm rooms where the female teachers slept on

bunk beds. Without these rooms, without this program, these women would have no

chance for any kind of education, no chance at all to come to Kabul.

In the men's classroom, there were only cushions around the wall, not even a rug.

The men had short beards, and most wore shirts that hung below their knees. Two had

donned Western-style blazers over top. A lone man in the corner stood and struggled to

say his name in English and to welcome me to Afghanistan.

I gave a speech in the university's cafeteria and announced the establishment of

two new schools, the American University of Afghanistan and the International School of

Kabul, a high school. "These are more than just development projects," I said, "they also

signify the bond between the American and Afghan people. They are symbols of our

shared hopes and dreams for the future. That dream is of a prosperous, peaceful, and

above all, a free Afghanistan, where both men and women stand upright in equality. "

A nearby room had been set up like a grand Afghan bazaar, with piles of handwoven rugs and rows of dresses on display. There were twenty booths, each showcasing

goods made by women entrepreneurs, rug makers, weavers, embroiderers, and clothing

makers, all microenterprise projects. The driving force behind many of these programs

was a woman named Mina Sherzoy, who had escaped to California in 1979 after the

Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. She had returned in 2002 following the fall of the

Taliban to help her fellow countrywomen. But there were also women with no prior

connection to Afghanistan. Connie Duckworth, the first female sales and trading partner

at Goldman Sachs, had helped to found the Arzu rug company. "Arzu" means hope in the

Dari language of Afghanistan. As an enterprise, Arzu works to preserve the traditional

Afghan craft of rug weaving and pays women bonuses for high-quality workmanship. In

return, Arzu weavers must agree to send their sons and daughters to school, to take

literacy classes themselves, and to receive pre-and postnatal medical care for themselves

and their babies. After I had returned home, I ordered two Arzu rugs for the White House

collection to place in the hallways of the residence. I purchased a third rug for the small

library at our ranch, so that we might always have something created by these Afghan

women.

On the grounds of Kabul University, I helped plant a tree in a new grove on what

had been barren land. That cluster of trees is still green and growing.

Behind the scenes, Anita had been in negotiations with the Secret Service to see if

I could leave the grounds of the university and go into Kabul itself. The agent in charge,

Joe Clancy, finally said yes, but the outing could not last more than twenty minutes. We

had to be onboard our airplane and in the sky by nightfall. We drove into the city in a

convoy, along one of Kabul's major streets, and stopped in front of three little stores,

clustered together, sharing walls. One was a bakery, with a picture of a white frosted cake

and a smattering of English words on its wooden sign. Through the window I could see

shelves of fluffy breads and pastries. The sidewalk in front of the shops was concrete, but

just beyond, the concrete gave way to packed dust. Trash, empty bottles, and papers,

carried by the wind, came to rest where the fresh concrete lip rose. Three children in a

nearby house peeked out from their windows, and Therese Burch, one of my advance

staff, walked over and invited them to come outside. The older boy knew a few words of

English, but his younger brother and sister looked at me in silence. They wore only thin

jackets, and in the chill of March, the younger children had no shoes for their feet.

I said hello and offered them one of the small gifts that we had brought, a

kaleidoscope. I held it up to my eye and turned the tube to show them how it worked.

Their faces broke into smiles. Inside the bakery I looked at the display, and the

employees insisted upon pressing a bag filled with sweet Afghan cookies into my hands.

I paid for the bag and thanked them. The pastries looked delicious, but of course, the

Secret Service agents wouldn't let us eat them.

In those few minutes, I had exhausted my unscheduled off-site visit time. We

piled back into the convoy and returned to the helicopters that ferried us to the

Presidential Palace, where Hamid Karzai was waiting.

The palace is old and, after years of neglect, was in terrible shape. Crumbling

blocks had been repainted and fresh plaster patches hid aging bullet holes in the walls. It

was a stark place, several years away from even a modest garden or grounds. The inside

was furnished in heavy, carved wooden pieces and old, slightly worn tapestries. Only the

official meeting area, where we sat on gold-trimmed claw-foot chairs, beneath a crystal

chandelier, had any look of opulence. As we talked, President Karzai's staff served us

bright glasses of pomegranate juice. The Secret Service blanched as I raised my glass.

Lindsey, my assistant, rushed over to whisper that they didn't want me to drink it, so I left

the beautiful glass of deep red liquid untouched; I was dying to drink that pomegranate

juice.

After our meeting President Karzai walked me out of his offices and across a

long, enclosed courtyard to a smaller, modern, rectangular building, made of concrete and

blocks of stone. The woman who appeared in the doorway was his wife, who is so private

that she is rarely seen in public. Zeenat Karzai wore a long, gray coat, and her head was

tightly swathed in a full white scarf. Unlike some Muslim women, who push their scarves

back above their hairlines to reveal a tantalizing bit of their dark tresses, she concealed

every strand of hair. In a nod to Western ways, she clutched a gray purse in her hand as

we were introduced.

Sitting beneath a painting of her husband in her living room, Dr. Karzai offered

me tea. She is a trained obstetrician-gynecologist in a nation with the world's second

highest mortality rate for women in childbirth. In 2005 an Afghan mother would die

every half hour trying to bring a child into the world. Dr. Karzai told me of the desperate

need for a maternity hospital in Kabul. The French hospital that Bernadette Chirac had

discussed at the previous year's G8 Summit had yet to materialize, and Dr. Karzai

pleaded for help, hoping that the United States could do more. Clasping her purse in her

hand, she walked me to the door and took a few brief steps into the sunshine before

retreating inside. I turned around to wave as we hurried to the helos for the thirty-minute

flight back to Bagram.

At the base, in a bare prefab room with Afghan throw rugs to warm the cold floor,

I listened to a briefing by Lieutenant General David Barno and Major General Jason

Kamiya on provisional reconstruction and military projects. As they pointed at provincial

maps, my eyes were drawn to the vast, mountainous border between Pakistan and

Afghanistan, the reputed hiding place for Osama bin Laden and the refuge for the

Taliban. Even on paper, it looked formidable. By 4:55 that afternoon, I was standing in

the chow line to eat dinner with the troops in the Dragon Chow Dining Hall. We ate

chicken tenders, ketchup, and broccoli under a large American flag. Sitting on one side of

me was a female soldier, wearing camouflage fatigues, her sandy hair pulled back into a

ponytail. These were the two worlds, burka-clad women and women in combat fatigues,

now inhabiting the same dusty Afghan ground.

At 5:45 p.m., we were on board the plane, chasing the setting sun. Touchdown

was at 1:45 a.m. at Andrews Air Force Base.

I had told the Afghan students that it was "an extraordinary privilege" to be with

them that day. It was. It was a privilege to see Kabul and to be able to thank our troops in

Bagram. But it was powerful to see with my own eyes the complete devastation in

Afghanistan. As years of Soviet war and then Taliban rule had shown, it is easy and quick

to destroy, and slow and hard to rebuild. I can understand the impatience of many with

the halting progress made by new democracies around the world. From our vantage point,

our own democracy and government may appear to have come easily. But they did not.

Thirteen years after America declared its independence, we had to completely revamp

our government. And though in 1789 we started with a near perfect document, the

Constitution, it took decades, even centuries, for us to build a more perfect country. It

took over seventy-five more years to achieve the abolition of slavery. It was fifty-five

years after the surrender at Appomattox before women earned the right to vote and

another forty-five years beyond that before real civil rights came to our own nation. Only

in hindsight do we feel the onward rush of progress and think of it as inevitable and

unstoppable. In the moment, it looks like something else indeed.

Two days after I returned from Kabul, Pope John Paul II died in Vatican City.

George and I, accompanied by Gampy, Bill Clinton, and Condi Rice, flew to Rome for

the largest gathering of heads of state in history. In total, seventy presidents and prime

ministers, four kings, and five queens gathered to mourn his passing. Four million other

mourners packed the streets around the basilica, and millions had walked past his body as

it lay in state. We too went to pay our respects, kneeling at the communion rail. Before us

lay the once vibrant man who had helped rally millions in Eastern Europe to the cause of

freedom and the end of communist oppression, and who had worked so tirelessly on

behalf of the poor and the downtrodden. No effort had been made to cover his skin,

which had grown mottled with age and illness. But his was a life of devotion, a life of

blessings, a life well-lived.

Throughout the funeral service, the skies threatened rain. Then, at the precise

moment when John Paul's plain pine casket with a simple inlaid cross was lifted high to

be seen one final time by the mourners before it was carried into the Basilica of St.

Peter's, a ray of sun broke through the clouds and shone bright upon the casket.

I thought of John Paul again the very next month as my motorcade raced along

the flat desert highway leading from Jordan's main airport to the capital city of Amman,

where stacked dwellings rose up the mountainsides and the colors were muted desert

browns and beige. I had arrived in the region where the world's three major faiths

converge, moving from Jordan to Israel to Egypt.

In Amman I ate dinner at the private residence of King Abdullah and Queen

Rania, whom we had hosted a number of times in the United States, including for a

weekend at Camp David. We ate at a long, rectangular wooden table, and during dinner

Queen Rania excused herself to tend to her fourth child, a four-month-old baby, whose

mews and cries drifted downstairs.

I was in Jordan to speak at the World Economic Forum, which was meeting at the

edge of the Dead Sea. I would be addressing a large group of delegates before heading

off to a smaller roundtable. As UNESCO's honorary ambassador for its Decade of

Literacy, I spoke about education and literacy, and while I did, a desert fly buzzed around

my face, attracted to the bright spotlight of the speaker's podium. My speech proved to be

a different kind of irritant to some of the attendees. The message about education and

opportunity for all citizens, including women, coming from the wife of a conservative

American president, was too much for some of the men. "In my country," I said, "women

didn't secure the right to vote until more than a century after our nation's founding. But

now we know that a nation can only achieve its best future and its brightest potential

when all of its citizens, men and women, participate in the government and in decision

making." I continued, "I'm reminded of what V'clav Havel, the former president of the

Czech Republic, once told me, 'Laura, you know, democracy is hard because it requires

the participation of all the people.'"

Below me, in the audience, there was a rustling, then a murmur, and then a

delegation of white-robed men in red-checked head coverings walked out. They were

from Saudi Arabia, where women cannot vote and cannot drive. They are not permitted

to travel freely, and many have no chance for anything beyond the most rudimentary

education, if that. I spoke of how, across the broader Middle East and North Africa, more

than 75 million women and 45 million men are illiterate. Then I spoke about freedom.

"As freedom becomes a fact of life for rising generations in the Middle East, young

people need to grow up with a full understanding of freedom's rights and responsibilities:

the right to discuss any issue in the public sphere, and the responsibility to respect other

people and their opinions." I added, "Freedom, especially freedom for women, is more

than the absence of oppression. It's the right to speak and vote and worship freely. Human

rights require the rights of women. And human rights are empty promises without human

liberty."

No one in the press reported the walkout--probably better for the delicate

balancing acts of global diplomacy--but it was a clear reminder of how long the journey

is for women to become men's equals in the wider world.

Afterward, I spent time with Jordan's king and queen at a roundtable with Arab

youth, where we discussed education and economic improvement. Both King Abdullah

and Queen Rania have charitable foundations devoted to improving lives in Jordan. I

went on to nearby Mount Nebo, the last place where Moses stopped. Wearily, he

ascended the mountain and glimpsed the Promised Land he would never reach. It was

here that Moses died, leaving the Israelites to complete their journey alone. On clear

days, from the rise, the scene is breathtaking; it is possible to see as far as Bethlehem and

Jerusalem.

During the drive we passed encampments of nomadic Bedouins, their camels

kneeling on the hot sands and their tents billowing in the desert winds. The heat was so

searing and Mount Nebo so steep that my limousine broke down on the journey up the

winding roads. My staff and I piled into the reserve vehicle to finish the climb. Waiting

for me afterward in an old stone restaurant at the base of the mountain were a group of

Jordanian women leaders. Before I left, I visited a girls' school and then the Jordan River

Foundation, a special project of Queen Rania's to support women through

microenterprise.

As we returned along the same flat desert highway to the airport, everything was

routine. Then, a second later, it was not. The vehicles in my convoy swerved, evaded, and

then accelerated. Something was very wrong. A rogue car had broken into my motorcade.

In the seconds that followed, we did not know if it was a confused driver who had merely

pulled out onto the road or if the people inside the vehicle knew that this was my convoy

and that, in one of these vehicles, they would find me. Immediately an entire Secret

Service tactical team shouldered their guns and swarmed along the windows and back

hatch of an accompanying Chevy Suburban, aiming their weapons and leaning out into

the rushing air. Every cell phone signal was shut down. The fear was that a phone signal

could be used to detonate a remotely controlled bomb or IED hidden inside the unknown

car or preplanted along the roads. The car was intercepted, and we continued on, racing to

the airport at breakneck speed. I never knew from where or how, or why, that vehicle

came. It was a stark reminder of the daily threats that hover over nearly everyone's lives

in this part of the world.

A brief flight ferried me across the border and into Israel, to Tel Aviv. Hugging

the coast of the Mediterranean, Tel Aviv is a city of glittering, modern buildings and

some well-preserved old quarters, where it is still possible to imagine what life must have

been like when this was a sleepy trading port centuries ago. From the air the lands of

Jordan and Israel are a contrast of tightly massed towns and cities and vaster open spaces.

We traveled the quick distance to Jerusalem, passing road signs for Bethlehem and

Jericho. I was invited for tea with Gila Katsav, wife of the president of Israel. Israel is a

beacon of democracy for the region and has had, since its founding out of the ashes of the

Holocaust, a special relationship with the United States. It is one of America's staunchest

allies, and the United States is in turn committed to Israel's survival.

Mrs. Katsav and Sheila Kurtzer, wife of the American ambassador, accompanied

me to the Western Wall, one of the holiest places in Judaism, where the faithful come to

pray. It is considered the sole remnant of the Holy Temple that was destroyed by the

Romans, and religious and secular Jews make pilgrimages to this site. The original

structures are attributed to King David; sections of the wall have stood on this spot since

nineteen years before the birth of Christ, and their stones remain today. As is custom, I

covered my head in a shawl and placed a tiny note in a narrow crevice in the limestone.

On it was written a prayer for peace.

When I had arrived at the wall, there was a small group protesting for the release

of Jonathan Pollard, the American civilian naval intelligence officer who pleaded guilty

in 1986 to the charge of spying for Israel and was sentenced to life in prison. There were

more confrontations to come.

On the hill above the Western Wall sit the Temple Mount and the Dome of the

Rock, a shrine built by the Muslim conquerors of Jerusalem in 692. Its shiny gold-leaf

dome reaches to the sky, and its ornate walkway of columns and mosaic art envelop the

worn contours of an ancient, holy stone where the prophet Mohammed is believed to

have ascended to Heaven and where the Jewish patriarch Abraham prepared to sacrifice

his son Isaac. It is one of the most revered sites in the Islamic world. A visit to the

Temple Mount by Ariel Sharon, when he was a candidate for Israeli prime minister in

2000, triggered a call for mass riots by the Palestinians' Hamas and Fatah organizations

and formed the pretext for the Second Intifada or Palestinian uprising. Israeli police and

officials, and even officials from the Palestinian Authority, are no longer permitted on the

site; few non-Muslims routinely enter.

Both the dome and the Western Wall are holy places and always crowded with

pilgrims. It had been decided that I would make the brief walk from the entrance to the

Temple Mount to the dome itself, although in the crowds, people were pushing to get a

glimpse of me. A few were worshipers who did not want me at the site, but the vast

majority were paparazzi and members of the foreign press who wanted to call out

questions and shoot photos. I had my Secret Service detail, but, seeing the mounting

media frenzy, the Israeli security forces formed a ring around us. The security personnel

brushed away anyone who came too close. Though the Israelis were not welcome beyond

the gate leading to the dome, they would not allow me to enter without additional

protection. I was not afraid, my Arab hosts were not afraid, but Suzanne Malveaux of

CNN, who was accompanying me on the trip, was totally unnerved. In her televised

report, a sixty-second walk looked like a major confrontation. The next morning she

asked me if the president had been alarmed when he saw what happened. "Yes, Suzanne,"

I replied, "but only after he saw your report, on television."

I toured the beautiful holy site, which is managed by a special Muslim trust, and

then drove to the ancient city of Jericho, upon whose walls Joshua's trumpets blew. Inside

this Arab city, a sadly desolate place compared to the bustle of Jerusalem, I met with a

group of Palestinian women. Afterward, I stopped to see one of the treasures of the

Judean desert: Hisham's Palace, built in 724 by the Caliph Hisham, who ruled an empire

that stretched from India to the Pyrenees. Although the palace had been damaged by an

earthquake, the floor of the reception hall remained untouched. It is inlaid with the

beautiful Tree of Life mosaic, depicting a pomegranate tree under which are gathered

lions and gazelles. The gazelles are the visitors, coming to pay their respects and show

their good wishes to the kingdom. But on the right is one gazelle that wishes the ruler

harm, and so is savaged by a lion determined to protect his domain and take revenge. It

was no accident that the mosaic graced a formal state receiving room. Perhaps diplomacy

has changed little in thirteen centuries.

At day's end we traveled back to Jerusalem, to Yad Vashem, the Israeli memorial

to the Holocaust. I had visited the memorial before, in 1998, when Barbara was spending

a semester abroad in Rome. George, Jenna, and I had spent Thanksgiving with her, and

then George and I had gone on to visit Israel with a group of American Jews and

Christians. One was a man named David Flaum, the child of Holocaust survivors who

had come to the United States. His older brother and sister, born in Europe, had perished

at the hands of the Nazis. Worn by years of suffering, David's mother had died when he

was still young. As we entered the area that commemorates the children killed in the

Holocaust, David broke down. Together George, David, and I gazed upon the lights of

thousands of tiny candles, each one reflecting its image into a mirror until the reflections

stretch out toward infinity. Every light represents a child lost, a living, breathing child

who is no more, like the brother and the sister whom David had never known.

For a first lady, there are moments of maximum political controversy, and they

often strike without warning. Mine was to come the next morning, just after we visited

the Church of the Resurrection in Abu Ghosh, an Arab-Israeli town. The nuns and monks

sang Psalm 150 in Hebrew, a beautiful display of voice and faith. Indeed, here in this

peaceful spot, it seemed that all faiths might exist together in peace. A couple of hours

later, I arrived at the Ittihadiyya Palace on the outskirts of Cairo to call on Suzanne

Mubarak, first lady of Egypt. Suzanne is close to my mother-in-law. In one of my

albums, I have the official vice presidential photo of Bar showing Suzanne Jenna and

Barbara's first real baby pictures, taken just a few weeks after they were born.

I had arrived two days before a nationwide referendum on future presidential

elections. I had known that elections were scheduled, but in weeks of staff meetings and

in my National Security Council briefing for the trip, no one had mentioned that my visit

would be so close to the referendum vote. Egypt is an important U.S. ally, but it also jails

political opponents. I had walked, unprepared, into a potential minefield. In retrospect, it

was probably one of the worst possible times for me to be in Egypt. Right away the

Egyptian and American press asked me about the upcoming vote. And while I had reams

of official talking points on educational programs and compliments about cultural sites,

such as the pyramids and the library at Alexandria, no one had thought to include a

detailed briefing paper on current political issues in the country. I answered that holding

elections was a "bold step" toward democracy, but both the referendum and the actual

presidential elections that followed were later criticized as insufficiently democratic for

not allowing a full slate of opposition candidates to participate. Days after I left,

protesters against the May referendum were beaten in the streets. And when one of

Egypt's leading opposition figures, Ayman Nour, who was jailed early in 2005, strongly

petitioned for a "rerun" of the presidential vote, the election commission denied his

request.

I imagine that people at the NSC thought the first lady was going abroad to do

cultural events and ladies' things and assumed that I would never be asked about politics.

After all, I was taping an episode of Egypt's version of *Sesame Street, Alam Simsim,* and

visiting the Egyptian Muppet version of the grocery shop, the house and carpentry

workshop, the invention corner, and the garden and library. But we had selected that

event in part because 85 percent of Egypt's preschoolers and 54 percent of their mothers

watch *Alam Simsim*. An appearance there had the potential to reach more ordinary

citizens than high-level summitry. Yet while I might have been better prepared, the fact is

that, for all first ladies, improvisation comes with the terrain.

After the television taping, Suzanne Mubarak hosted a lunch in my honor and

then we toured Abu Sir, one of Egypt's thousand "girl-friendly schools," dedicated to

girls and built in 2003 in the shadow of the pyramids. From there we saw the pyramids

themselves. With the press in tow, I was in the middle of a tour with Dr. Zahi Hawass,

who directs the Giza pyramids excavation. He was preparing to unveil a new discovery

when Jim VandeHei, then a political reporter for *The Washington Post*, elbowed his way

to the front of the press pool, climbed onto the pyramid plateau, and began shouting out

questions about the Egyptian referendum and Hosni Mubarak's political and election

plans. Dr. Hawass appeared dismayed and completely taken aback to have this outburst

happen in the middle of Egypt's premier historical site. It was a violation of protocol, and

as far as the Egyptian antiquity experts were concerned, Jim VandeHei was part of the

U.S. delegation. Sometimes members of the press forget that they are not seen as

independent entities abroad. I quietly apologized, knowing that this incident would not be

attributed to an individual reporter or *The Washington Post*; it would be blamed on me

and, by extension, on George.

My first solo trip to the Middle East had been a series of land mines. The Saudi

walkout during my World Economic Forum speech seemed positively mild by the time I

boarded the plane to return home. But these moments were fleeting, while the region's

problems were far more intractable. My meetings with Israeli and Palestinian women

were vivid confirmations of the often deep distrust that exists among some on both sides.

When I sat down with the Israeli women, they spoke of the horrid things said about Jews

in Arab textbooks. When I sat down with Palestinian women, they lamented the security

barrier that Israel was constructing along the West Bank, and how it made their lives

more difficult. Each time, in their words, there was a quality of "if only." If only they

would change their textbooks, if only they would take down the barrier, then we would

get along. There were so many if onlys.

From my first encounter with the British tabloids, when I was dubbed a "cowgirl,"

I was fascinated to discover what parts of American culture struck a chord overseas and

how other countries saw us. But I never imagined that one innocent speech I gave on a

Saturday night in a hotel in Washington, D.C., would have such a lasting impact abroad.

It was April 30, 2005, the night of the annual White House Correspondents' Association

dinner. The correspondents' dinner is the culmination of a Washington ritual of roasting

the president. It begins with the Alfalfa Club in January and continues through the late

winter and early spring with the Gridiron Club, the White House News Photographers

Association, and the Radio and Television Correspondents' Association, all building up to

the crescendo: the correspondents' dinner, some three thousand people gathered in black

tie in the basement ballroom at the Washington Hilton hotel. There, beneath a white

cutout ceiling that looks as if it spent its previous life on the set of *Star Trek*, the

president sits and listens while comedians and members of the press crack barbed jokes

about him. Then the president is expected to give his own humorous speech. As George

put it, "People make fun of the president and then it is the president's turn to get up and

make fun of himself." The evening's purpose is to honor members of the White House

Press Corps, but news organizations also try to fill their tables with celebrities, the

famous and the infamous, from all walks of life, and the evening may be the closest thing

Washington, D.C., has to a glitzy Hollywood party.

That night, as George began his speech, I quickly interrupted him. "Not that old

joke, not again," I said. "I've been attending these dinners for years and just quietly sitting

here. I've got a few things I want to say for a change.

"George always says he's delighted to come to these press dinners. Baloney. He's

usually in bed by now. I'm not kidding. I said to him the other day, 'George, if you really

want to end tyranny in the world, you're going to have to stay up later.'" I had been close

to petrified when I started, but by now the room was convulsed with laughter. I moved on

to my *Desperate Housewives* bit. "Here's our typical evening: Nine o'clock, Mr.

Excitement here is sound asleep, and I'm watching *Desperate Housewives*--with Lynne

Cheney. Ladies and gentlemen, I am a desperate housewife. I mean, if those women on

that show think they're desperate, they ought to be with George." I ended my comedic

stand-up career by comparing George's penchant for brush clearing to The *Texas*

Chainsaw Massacre and my mother-in-law to *The Godfather*'s Don Corleone. The speech

got a standing ovation, but my last lines were serious. "So in the future, when you see me

just quietly sitting up here, I want you to know that I'm happy to be here for a reason--I

love and enjoy being with the man who usually speaks to you on these occasions."

Around the world that last sentence was left out, and for years people from

Europe, Africa, Asia, South America, and the Middle East couldn't imagine why I would

publicly go onstage and rib my husband. The whole concept of "roasting" a president or

other prominent figure is particularly American and can be hard for other cultures to

grasp. In hushed voices, foreign leaders or their spouses would ask me, "Are you really a

desperate housewife?"

On July 7, just after the G8 leaders arrived in Gleneagles, Scotland, for their

summit, four coordinated bomb blasts were detonated in London's subway and bus

system during rush hour, killing fifty-two and injuring seven hundred. The bombings

were carried out by Islamic extremists. Only twenty-four hours before, Tony and Cherie

Blair had arrived in Scotland to the triumphant news that London had won the 2012

Olympics. Their elation was swiftly replaced by grief. George and I could so well

understand the horror of seeing ordinary citizens attacked and murdered as they went

about their daily working lives. The summit continued, but Tony immediately raced to

London. The blasts overshadowed one of his central goals for the G8 meeting, persuading

the world's industrialized nations to forgive the often crippling developing world debt.

The problems of debt were particularly acute in sub-Saharan Africa.

George and I had traveled to the African continent twice, once when his father

was president and again in 2003, to the west coast nation of Senegal and the continent's

southern tip, South Africa and Botswana, then to Uganda in the east and Nigeria along

the western coast. In Senegal, under a blistering sun and amid blinding white sands, we

walked with Condi Rice and Colin Powell to the infamous slave fortress on the island of

Goree and imagined the routes that had carried their families to our shores.

The fortress is a dark and isolated place, sitting on a cliff with the waves breaking

below, and its very darkness and dampness are testament to the mournful horror of what

occurred inside and outside its walls. Together George and I stepped through the Door of

No Return, from which captured Africans were herded on board slave ships bound for the

Atlantic's deep waters. We stood in silence, as we had at other memorial sites and

battlefields both in the United States and abroad. I had no desire to talk; I remained in

solemn contemplation, knowing what had happened to the people who walked through

this door and the doors of other coastal fortresses. I wanted to honor the lives of the men,

women, and children who had been held here and those who had survived the horrific

journey aboard a slave ship only to arrive on docks in the New World and be sold at

auction.

This summer, I was returning to the continent with a cautious bit of hope. In 2003,

at his State of the Union address, two years before sub-Saharan Africa became a central

G8 cause, George had proposed a $15 billion U.S. initiative to combat the overwhelming

devastation of AIDS around the world, particularly in Africa. Called PEPFAR, the

President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, it focused on cutting transmission rates

between mothers and children, lowering the rate of new infection among youth and

adults, and putting those who were infected on antiretrovirals, with which they could

often lead nearly full lives. PEPFAR also devoted resources to caring for the vast

numbers of AIDS orphans. The fifteen focus countries targeted by the plan had 50

percent of all AIDS infections around the world.

Many African nations, like South Africa, have lost vast portions of their

populations, including much of their middle class and their workforce, to AIDS. They

were economically devastated and coping with massive human suffering. The tragedy

was compounded by the fact that for well over a decade, people across the African

continent were not being tested for AIDS. A positive test was a death sentence because

there were almost no medicines available in these nations to treat or manage AIDS.

Infected men and women continued to spread the disease. But now having treatment

available meant that getting an AIDS test was no longer the equivalent of learning you

were going to die. Helping to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS and to care for the sick would

have a transformative effect on the continent as a whole. In July of 2005 I was going to

see PEPFAR's early results.

I was thrilled to have Jenna traveling with me. Barbara had accompanied George

and me on that first trip in 2003, and afterward, so moved by what she had seen and so

proud of her dad's role in helping to combat HIV, she enrolled in Yale's comprehensive

survey course on AIDS. She was now living in Cape Town, South Africa, and working at

the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital, which treated AIDS patients and other

sufferers. South Africa was to be our first stop.

The press pool included Ann Curry from NBC's *Today* show, who was making

her first visit to the continent and would later tell me that this trip changed her life.

Africa as a continent is life-changing. In so many places, the scenery is beautiful

beyond description and the wildlife a marvel of creation. Barbara, who loved her little

cat, India, with all her heart, once told me, "The existence of cats proves that there must

be a Heavenly Creator," and indeed to look at lions and tigers in their full majesty is to

glimpse some of that splendor. Barbara and Jenna and I were mesmerized as we drove

through the Madikwe Game Reserve in South Africa, amid the lions, elephants, and

warthogs, accompanied by a cacophony of hundreds of birds. But too often, mere steps

from this striking beauty are poverty beyond imagination and tremendous human

suffering. In that Cape Town hospital, Barbara held tiny babies as they struggled with the

ravages of AIDS. About 70 percent of the globe's AIDS patients live in Africa.

I saw the reality of those numbers for myself when Jenna and I drove to the

Khayelitsha township, where the streets were little more than packed dust and the houses

woven together from strips of tar paper and tin. The bathrooms are a line of Porta-Potties

strung along the edge of the township, and the walk to them is fraught with peril. Almost

daily, women are raped and abused. I had come to meet mothers with AIDS, part of a

special Mothers2Mothers program founded in 2001 by a California doctor, Mitchell

Besser, along with Robin Smalley. Pregnant women are encouraged to come to the health

center to be tested for HIV. If they test positive, they start treatments with antiretrovirals,

to help prevent the AIDS virus from being transmitted to their babies. Each month 28

percent of the four hundred mothers who delivered children in the clinic were HIVpositive, but less than 5 percent of the babies born had the virus. Most of these women

not only are sick with HIV/AIDS but live in cold, tiny shacks, without plumbing or

electricity. They cannot see at night, and what little water they have must be stored in

buckets or bowls.

Mothers2Mothers also counsels pregnant women and trains HIV-positive mothers

to mentor and work with new groups of expectant mothers. In addition to paying these

trained counselors, the program provides an opportunity for the women in the township to

make and sell beadwork. After this visit, my staff wore their White House credentials on

brightly colored Mothers2Mothers beaded lanyards.

In the clinic a small group of women, many with babies balanced on their laps,

called me Grand Mama Laura and told me their stories. I held their hands as these

mothers told me of how they had been disowned by their own mothers when they

revealed that they had AIDS. Some women's entire families had barred them from

returning home. A woman named Babalwa told me that she had tested positive for HIV

when she was thirty-four weeks pregnant. She called her husband. "He thought I was

lying," she recalled, "so he went to get tested himself and was positive." Her voice caught

as she explained, "My life before was so violent and he was beating me and not sleeping

at home and this was the result. Because he was ashamed of what had happened, he

pulled himself up and we started to build up a new life for us."

Babalwa told me of accompanying another pregnant mother to her home to tell

her family that she had tested HIV-positive. "When I went to her family house, there

were five brothers and sisters and a mother." The young woman announced that she had

tested positive. Everyone sat, shocked and quiet. Then the woman's brother stood and

said, "You are not alone. I am also HIV-positive." One by one, every sibling in that room,

all six children, stood up and told their mother and their brothers and sisters that they too

had tested positive for HIV/AIDS. Babalwa ended with a plea "that we don't have more

orphans who are losing their parents. We need more mothers staying alive to take care of

their babies. We don't want any more HIV-positive babies." I thought of Barbara, holding

those little babies as they fought for life.

I hugged the mothers, and I left with tears in my eyes. "Please," I said, "come and

visit me in the White House." When I returned to the United States, we began making the

arrangements, and they arrived in the winter of 2006. There Babalwa told me, "Dr. Mitch

is our father, Robs is our mother, and we want Mrs. Bush to be our grandmother."

The stigma of AIDS cuts wide and deep across South Africa, which in 2005 had

more people infected with the disease than any other nation in the world. Talking frankly

about AIDS in South Africa requires talking about sexual abuse of women and infidelity,

which is rampant. Men who leave their families to find work in other cities may take up

with new girlfriends. Historically, women who were the victims of sexual violence and

abuse have had few legal protections; Babalwa could do nothing when her husband

struck her. I told the women I met, "Ending domestic violence, rape, and sexual abuse is

also essential to fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS." I hoped that if I, as an American first

lady, discussed those issues openly, many of them would feel less afraid to do so as well.

From South Africa, I flew to Tanzania, where, with Mrs. Anna Mkapa, the first

lady of Tanzania, I visited two Catholic-run organizations working to provide AIDS

prevention and care. I then traveled to a concrete-block-and-tin-roof school on the

Muslim-majority island of Zanzibar, where I was joined by Zanzibar's first lady, Mrs.

Shadya Karume. The school was built with seed money from the United States, replacing

the mud-and-thatched-roof hut that had been the students' prior classroom. Public and

private American aid had financed the construction of sixteen schools, and public and

private American funds had purchased twenty thousand books for children to read.

Before I departed, President and Mrs. Karume presented me with a beautiful chest filled

with exotic spices, recalling Zanzibar's storied past as a fabled destination for early

Western spice traders.

The final stop on my trip was Rwanda, scene of the horrific 1994 genocide, in

which some 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were shot and hacked to death by

rampaging Hutu militias. Many women who survived the massacres were raped; many

contracted AIDS. It is hard to envision the rivers of blood that must have run across the

red, dusty hills that rise up like walls around Kigali, the capital.

Waiting for me on the tarmac was Cherie Blair. For months we had planned to

travel together to Africa after Gleneagles. Her work as a human rights lawyer had made

her uniquely passionate about the efforts of Rwanda to come to terms with its genocide

and to try the perpetrators, both in international tribunals and in local Gacaca courts,

based partly on tribal customs and also on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that

South Africa had adopted after apartheid. (There was no way to try the vast numbers of

perpetrators in international courts.) The Gacaca courts gave the victims the chance to

confront those who had slaughtered their families and offered an opportunity for all to

begin the extraordinarily difficult process of making amends.

Great Britain had invested millions of pounds per year in helping to redevelop

Rwanda. The British government initially balked at covering the costs of Cherie's trip

because she had no official title. She flew on a commercial jet, with one staffer and a lone

protection officer--the British government had rejected my offer to take her on my plane.

At the airport, she rode in the back of the British ambassador's Range Rover as it fell in

behind my motorcade.

Our first stop was the Kigali Memorial Center, where we laid a wreath at one of

the mass tombs; 250,000 Rwandans are buried in the soft, rain-drenched earth on the

memorial's grounds. Inside were rooms containing unvarnished stories of human

brutality. Babies and toddlers had been held upside down by their legs as their heads were

cracked against walls, ridding the nation of the Tutsi "cockroaches," as the propagandists

called them. Cherie and I stood, looking at the photos of children who died and reading

the heartbreaking inscriptions underneath each image: "He loved ice cream." "She loved

Daddy."

At the FAWE Girls' School the next day, Jenna and I listened as young Rwandan

girls told us about their lives. After their presentations, one teacher asked his students,

"Now, do you have any questions for Mrs. Bush?" A lone girl shyly raised her hand.

"What did you do in the United States after the Civil War?" She was hoping to find an

answer to her future in our own blood-soaked past. I told her about our president,

Abraham Lincoln, who had wanted a healing rather than a punitive peace at the war's

end. I told her of his dream that the two sides would reunite as one whole nation.

Some of the most pioneering humanitarian work in Africa is being done by

American religious institutions. A special project of the organization World Relief

encourages local ministers to be tested for AIDS and to share the results with their

congregations. Inside a circular church with rough wooden benches, a concrete floor, and

simple cream walls, Jenna and I held feverish small children with HIV on our laps as a

Rwandan minister preached to the congregation. Just that year he had announced to his

worshipers that he'd tested positive for HIV/AIDS. By speaking openly about his disease,

he was hoping to help break the stigma and to convince them to be tested as well.

The toll from AIDS is enormous, but the numbers cannot capture the

consequences. One in particular is orphan children running their own households. In

Rwanda I met a girl named Tatu, who had lost her father to genocide when she was only

two; her mother had died of AIDS when she was eleven. Now twelve, she was caring for

three small half brothers, ages eight, six, and three. She had been abandoned a third time

by an older brother, who after their mother's death had returned to the family house, sold

it, and disappeared with the money. Tatu had dropped out of school to work and was

hawking fruit at a market stand to provide for her younger siblings. She sobbed as she

spoke, and I took her into my arms. American church groups were building a home for

her and her young brothers.

Rwanda is, of necessity, a society of women. In the genocide, hundreds of

thousands of men were killed. By 2005, women held nearly 50 percent of all the seats in

the National Assembly. Before we left, Cherie and I, accompanied by Kay Warren, wife

of Reverend Rick Warren, whose Saddleback Church has been active in Rwanda,

attended a dinner hosted by Jeannette Kagame, Rwanda's first lady, who had been born in

a Rwandan refugee camp in the Republic of Burundi and who had herself fought as a

Tutsi soldier. Seated with us, amid candlelight, overflowing flower vases, and white linen

tablecloths, were some of Rwanda's most prominent women. The ministers of justice, the

environment, education, labor, and economic planning, as well as the head of the

National AIDS Control Commission and female senators and parliamentarians, were all

in attendance. At my table were leading government ministers. We talked about the many

challenges facing Rwanda. At one point, I asked a simple question: How many of you

have had malaria? Malaria is a debilitating and even fatal disease carried by the bites of

mosquitoes: the United States eradicated it from its swamps and marshlands decades ago.

Each of the Rwandan women seated at the table answered, "Yes, of course I've had

malaria." All of them had been bitten, had fallen ill, and could have died.

I have been changed by Africa on each visit, in large measure because of the

tremendous hope I have seen among its people in the midst of overwhelming despair.

When George and I returned in 2008, we traveled again to Rwanda, where we stopped at

a school for teenagers. Some were orphans who had lost a parent to AIDS or to genocide.

As we left the school, we saw a group of teenagers waiting outside to greet us. One had a

sign, "God is Good." George nodded and said, "God *is* good." And these teenage children

replied, in unison, "All the time." To suffer as they have suffered, with genocide, disease,

and poverty, and to still believe "God is good. All the time"!

"I Told You I Would Come"

Greeting Governor Habiba Sarabi, Bamiyan Province, Afghanistan.

(Shealah Craighead/White House photo)

On Tuesday, August 23, 2005, a cluster of rain and thunderstorm clouds

coalesced over the Bahamas into what the National Weather Service named Tropical

Depression Twelve. The next day the depression became a storm, with winds above forty

miles per hour. It was the eleventh tropical storm of the 2005 season, and the weather

service christened it Katrina. Within twenty-four hours, Katrina was upgraded to a

Category 1 hurricane, and forecasters predicted that it would make landfall in Florida,

then turn toward the Alabama-Florida panhandle. At 6:30 that night, August 25, Katrina

arrived at the Dade and Broward county lines. Its winds were eighty miles per hour, its

rainfall up to sixteen inches. Three people drowned as the storm hit; three others were

killed by falling trees. More than 1.4 million homes and businesses lost power. Unsure of

where Katrina would head next, the Federal Emergency Management Agency began

positioning ice, water, and food at logistics centers in Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia,

Texas, and South Carolina. Within three days the federal government would have

finished the largest prepositioning of emergency assets in its history. But still, forecasters

could not say with certainty where the hurricane would turn.

Katrina passed over Florida and then reached the Gulf of Mexico, but instead of

heading north, it drifted west, its winds and rains growing stronger over the warm, late

summer waters of the gulf. At the end of the afternoon on August 26, weather forecasters

began predicting a new path, saying that the storm would now make landfall in the

Mississippi-Louisiana region. They also predicted that it would be a Category 4 or 5

storm. A Category 5 is considered a catastrophic storm, with winds in excess of 155

miles per hour. It can produce, as weather scientists clinically put it, "complete building

failure" in its immediate path. There are only three Category 5 storms ever recorded in

the United States; one of the worst was Hurricane Camille in 1969. When it came ashore

in Mississippi, it caused a twenty-four-foot storm tide, about one-quarter the height of the

2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

At five in the afternoon on Saturday, August 27, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin

called for a voluntary evacuation of the city. Early on August 28, Katrina officially

became a Category 5 storm.

George and I were at the ranch for a late-summer break. Inside the secure federal

trailers on the property, White House staff members, including Joe Hagin, deputy chief of

staff for operations, were monitoring the storm around the clock. The National Hurricane

Center began issuing advisories warning that the levees in New Orleans could be

"overtopped" by Lake Pontchartrain and "significant destruction" would likely be

experienced far from the hurricane's center. In the morning of August 28, George began

calling the governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco; the governor of Mississippi, Haley

Barbour; and Michael Brown, the head of FEMA. When he reached Kathleen Blanco, at

9:14, he told her that she needed to issue a mandatory evacuation order for New Orleans.

She responded that she did not think everyone could get out in time.

But by 9:30, Governor Blanco had heeded George's advice; along with Mayor

Nagin she did issue a mandatory evacuation call, the first ever in New Orleans's history.

Residents now had only hours to leave. By nightfall, heavy rains and high winds began to

lash the Gulf Coast. At 6:10 a.m. on Monday, August 29, Katrina made landfall in

Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, a peninsula that juts out into the Gulf of Mexico. It

arrived as a Category 3 storm with sustained winds of 115 miles per hour and gusts of

130 miles per hour. Katrina sliced through Plaquemines with a twenty-foot storm surge,

killing nine people. It continued northeast, clipping the eastern edge of the giant Lake

Pontchartrain and St. Bernard and Orleans parishes, along the Mississippi border. Its

main track was now over Mississippi, and after it made landfall, its force began to

weaken. By 1:00 p.m. Monday, Katrina had dropped to a Category 1 storm; by 7:00 p.m.,

it was downgraded to a tropical storm. And it had passed east of New Orleans. But the

damage was done.

The Gulf Coast storm surge had been as high as twenty-seven feet. Flooding

extended six miles inland and up to twenty-three miles along rivers and bays. But all day

Monday, the first reports George and the White House received from the Department of

Homeland Security and the Department of Defense and Army Corps of Engineers were

that New Orleans's levees had held. When Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin asked

Governor Blanco for an update on the status of the levees during an 11:00 a.m.

conference call, she told him her information was that New Orleans's levees had not been

breached. Instead, she reported, the main floodwaters were engulfing another, smaller

parish to the east. Not until after midnight, early on Tuesday morning, nearly eighteen

hours after the hurricane had swept through, did the Department of Homeland Security

report widespread breaches and flooding to the White House. New Orleans's levees and

floodwalls gave way; pumping stations that had lost electricity stopped working. Up to 80

percent of the city was filled with water that in low-lying sections was as much as twenty

feet deep. First responders could not reach the city, but prepositioned Coast Guard units

immediately swung into action. Over several days the Coast Guard rescued and

evacuated more than 33,000 people. The first of their teams began searching for survivors

just hours after Katrina came ashore.

On Wednesday morning, the day after we received word that the levees had

broken, George returned to Washington. He decided against landing in Louisiana or

Mississippi but flew over the devastated region instead. His decision was, on a much

larger scale, the same one I had made not to go to Afghanistan in 2002, 2003, or 2004.

Whenever a president, or even the first lady, travels, a huge infrastructure of personnel

accompanies him or her. And there is another huge infrastructure waiting on the ground.

In Afghanistan I had not wanted to use military assets, like helicopters, when they might

be needed on the battlefield. With people still trapped in their flooded homes and

thousands not yet evacuated from the Superdome, George did not want a single police

officer or National Guard unit or any other type of first response team to be diverted from

the rescue efforts to assist with a presidential visit. He had visited Ground Zero in New

York on September 14, only when he knew that it was highly unlikely anyone else could

or would be found alive. He did not want one single life to be lost because someone was

catering to the logistical requirements of a president. He did not want his convoy of

vehicles to block trucks delivering water or food or medical supplies, or to impede

National Guardsmen from around the nation who were arriving to help.

By Friday, September 2, nearly twenty-two thousand National Guard soldiers and

airmen had reached the region. Sixty-five hundred troops were in New Orleans alone.

Over fifty thousand guardsmen and -women from all fifty states, as well as U.S.

territories and the District of Columbia, would ultimately assist along the Gulf Coast.

That morning George traveled first to Mobile, Alabama, and then to two of the most

devastated cities, Biloxi, Mississippi, and New Orleans. I flew to Lafayette, Louisiana, to

see some of the six thousand people who had fled New Orleans and surrounding towns

and were now huddled in the Cajundome.

Already, people from across the country had arrived to help. As soon as the storm

hit on Sunday night and Monday morning, Red Cross volunteers, many of them retirees,

had begun driving from Iowa and other states to Louisiana and Mississippi, prepared to

live out of their cars if necessary. By the end of the week, thousands of men and women

from the Southern Baptist Convention began to arrive. The Southern Baptist Convention

has the third largest disaster relief organization in the United States, after the Red Cross

and the Salvation Army. Like many Red Cross volunteers, with whom they often partner,

the Baptists rolled out sleeping bags and unfurled hard cots inside local churches. When

one team of sixty first arrived, the only dry and empty place they could find to stay was a

local jail. For weeks these volunteers cooked thousands of meals each day, sometimes on

generators that they had hauled themselves in the backs of trucks. When they could, they

used donated food from Walmart and Subway, but knowing supplies would be tight, they

also brought their own. A single team of Baptist men and women from Oklahoma cooked

sixteen thousand meals a day in Louisiana. Other sites routinely made ten thousand hot

lunches and dinners. Red Cross volunteers helped distribute this food and also began

gathering clothes for families who had lost everything.

Inside Lafayette's Cajundome, 137 miles west of New Orleans, many Katrina

victims had been separated from friends and family; in some cases, mothers could not

find their toddler children. And in these early days, they did not know if they would ever

see their loved ones again. I served up plates of jambalaya and sat with elderly men and

women who were struggling with the thought of a lifetime of memories having vanished

and who were stunned by the prospect of having to start over again.

Sixty miles away, in Baton Rouge, I visited Acadian Ambulance, an ambulance

service that covers a wide swath of Louisiana and Mississippi. Because it was in Baton

Rouge, Acadian's communications facilities had not been knocked out by the storm or the

flooding. When patients were left stranded, and state and city officials had either

disappeared from New Orleans or were completely unreachable by e-mail or phone,

Acadian and its volunteers almost single-handedly evacuated hospitals and spent days

treating the sick and injured at the packed Superdome. The company, helped by spouses

and siblings of its employees, located more than forty military and out-of-state

helicopters, as well as 150 ambulances from other parts of the country, to transport

critically ill patients, some of whom exhausted doctors were keeping alive by manually

squeezing oxygen into their lungs. They packed newborn babies into cardboard boxes to

fit more of them inside the helicopters. With their satellite telephones, a mobile antenna,

a portable generator, and incredible determination, Acadian employees and volunteers

saved hundreds, if not thousands, of lives. I wanted to thank Richard Zuschlag, the chief

of Acadian Ambulance, and his team, who had done what some professional city, state,

and federal disaster management officials had failed to do: help people and save lives in

some of the most horrific conditions imaginable.

On Sunday, George and I traveled to the American Red Cross National

Headquarters in Washington, D.C., to ask for donations of blood and for volunteers. On

Monday, I returned with George to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for a briefing on the

emergency operations and then visited with more evacuees at the Bethany World Prayer

Center. In total, after Katrina, I made twenty-three visits to Louisiana and the Gulf Coast;

the first year, I traveled there nearly every month.

At the Bethany Prayer Center, I sat on the ground with children, and I saw in their

eyes the same devastation that I had seen in New York after 9-11. For the kids in New

York, the fears were loud noises, traveling on planes, or riding in the subway. Here, the

fear was of water. Some children were terrified of getting in a bath, or even of the sound

of the tap running. I heard stories about people who had driven out just as the storm hit,

people in pickup trucks who had been caught in the flood surge and spent a day or a night

trapped inside, with water up to their doors. And in the chaos, thousands were still

missing.

In tragedies there are heroes, and Hurricane Katrina produced a tremendous share,

from the volunteers who came not just in the first weeks but also in the first years. They

helped build new homes and fed and clothed the displaced. There were the heroic Coast

Guard rescuers who had maneuvered boats and helicopters to pick people off of rooftops

as the floodwaters engulfed their homes, and the National Guard troops and airmen who

saved lives and brought order and relief, as well as the volunteer medics and ambulance

crews. But there was also a group of retired law enforcement officers, including former

sheriffs and former Secret Service agents, who volunteered to find the missing. They

were activated as part of a special project run by the National Center for Missing and

Exploited Children in Alexandria, Virginia. On September 5, the center opened a Katrina

missing persons hotline. It processed over eleven thousand calls in its first nine days of

operation. Five thousand eighty-eight children were reported missing; by September 15,

the retired lawmen had resolved 701 cases.

One reason there were so many missing kids was that when evacuation boats and

helicopters arrived, there were often only a few seats left. Without hesitation, parents and

grandparents said, "Take the children." But frequently families were evacuated to

different centers, even different states. One child who was plucked from the top of a New

Orleans apartment building amid the floodwaters was two-year-old Gabrielle Alexander.

But no one knew her name. She was evacuated to a children's center in Baton Rouge,

where she would not speak a word. Volunteers from the National Center for Missing and

Exploited Children traveled to Baton Rouge and photographed the children. Their

pictures were repeatedly broadcast on television, particularly by CNN and CBS News.

When a center volunteer knelt down to photograph Gabrielle, he turned the camera over

to show her the digital image, hoping to get her to speak. She pointed at her picture and

said, "Gabby." Now the volunteers had a name to put with a face. They began combing

the lists of missing children and found an entry for a two-year-old Gabrielle Alexander.

Her mother had been evacuated to San Antonio, Texas. After confirming with law

enforcement that these were mother and child, the center arranged for a special Angel

Flight to fly Gabby to her mom. They raced into each other's arms on the tarmac in San

Antonio.

Within six months center volunteers located and reunited every missing child on

the list with his or her family. The center volunteers came from around the country and

worked, many of them, eighteen to twenty hours a day, because they had the skills to

help. And they did it solely from the goodness of their hearts. The following spring, I had

the center volunteers and some families that they had helped to reunite, including

Gabby's, come to the White House to meet in person and to share their stories.

Other heroes were the teachers and the principals in schools throughout

Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Many of them had lost everything. They were

living in their cars or with relatives, yet from the first days after Katrina struck, they were

back at their schools, using buckets to clear the mud from the floors and walls. I spoke

with one teacher who had to throw out every book from her second-floor library; they

were entirely mildewed by the time she reached the school. In Pass Christian and

Southaven, Mississippi, and Chalmette, Louisiana, and New Orleans, I saw so many

teachers who were stressed and weakened and, if not crying, on the verge of tears. They

could cry with me when they could not at other moments or in other settings. The rest of

the time, they were trying so very hard to be strong for their students, their schools, and

their communities. And they knew that if parents had schools for their children to attend,

they would be more likely to return home.

There were countless lessons to be learned. Katrina was in many ways the perfect

storm; everything that could go wrong, did. There was virtually no communication on the

ground. The New Orleans mayor had retreated to the Hyatt Regency hotel, where phone

service was lost even before the storm hit. For three days his command center could not

receive e-mails or incoming calls. The White House gave him a mobile phone on Friday,

September 2, but he had to lean out a window to get a signal. Police officers in New

Orleans didn't have cars; they broke into the local Cadillac dealership and drove off with

whatever they could find. During the first few days, George and the White House

repeatedly offered to send thousands of additional federal troops to stop the looting and

violence in New Orleans, but Governor Blanco declined the offer because she wanted her

office to be in charge, rather than the federal government. No one in a position of

authority for emergency planning at the state or city level had envisioned anything like

Katrina, and when it came, almost no one was prepared for the devastation.

Perhaps there was never any way to be fully prepared. The destruction was so

huge, a near tsunami-size surge and violent storm covering an area larger than all of

Great Britain. Over the next few years, when I landed in New Orleans and drove into the

city, I would pass street after street where the houses were boarded up and marked with

orange X's to show that they had been searched. Sometimes they had another code, a

black circle, spray-painted alongside, to show that the body of a person or an animal had

been found within the walls. The National Hurricane Center's official estimate is that, in

Louisiana and Mississippi, fifteen hundred people died as a direct result of the Katrina

storm.

When I landed in New Orleans on October 10, I saw packs of abandoned dogs

running through the streets, barking and scavenging. Some eight hundred abandoned

dogs and cats were rescued in a special airlift organized by Madeleine Pickens, wife of

the oilman T. Boone Pickens. Volunteers located watermelon trucks to ferry the weak

and dehydrated animals to the airport, where they were flown to shelters as far away as

California. About 50 percent of the animals were reunited with their owners; the others,

some whose owners could no longer care for them, were fostered and adopted. One New

Orleans man spent seven days with his dog on the roof of his house, until he ran out of

heart medication and had to be airlifted out of the city. The dog, Brutus, was transported

to San Diego for care. A female volunteer at the San Diego animal control office located

the hospital where the owner had been taken, but the man had been released. She began

combing phone books and calling every number with the same last name, eventually

finding the man's cousin. The owner was flown to San Diego for a tearful reunion with

his dog--the reason he had spent seven days on his roof was that he had not wanted to

abandon his pet. To this day, every two months a New Orleans animal shelter worker

drives to San Diego with forty animals in need of adoption, in a custom van donated by

Madeleine.

But as bad as New Orleans was, the devastation was often worse in other places

along the Mississippi Gulf. In parts of Louisiana, houses had been flooded, perhaps

moved slightly off their foundations, but inside something might be salvaged. In

Mississippi, for miles on end, there was nothing but bare foundations. I drove through

coastal towns where hundreds of gorgeous antebellum homes, houses that had withstood

over 150 years of other storms, had been completely washed away. Blocks were empty

except for the debris. Week after week I met young mayors in these towns; many of them

had been in office only since January. Now their homes and stores were wiped out; there

were no businesses, no economy. They were presiding over ghost towns. All knew that,

no matter what, some residents would never return.

I visited with those who had lost their homes, and I came back as communities

were rebuilt, as they opened schools or cut the ribbons on playgrounds. But I wanted to

do more. In 2001 I had started, with the help of some very good friends, the Laura Bush

Foundation for America's Libraries. Money was raised to provide small grants for school

libraries around our country so that they could purchase books and research materials;

many times these grants would double or triple a library's annual book budget. By May

2005, the Laura Bush Foundation had given grants to 428 school libraries nationwide.

I had already invited the foundation's fund-raisers for breakfast at the White

House on September 24, 2005, the day of the National Book Festival, to thank them. That

morning I asked them to continue to raise money, to be given only to schools along the

Gulf Coast; a basic elementary school library book collection costs $50,000, a high

school collection at least $100,000. My friends Bill Marriott, Marshall Payne, Ruth

Altshuler, and Pam Willeford agreed. They raised and we have given nearly $6 million to

rebuild the library collections of these devastated schools.

And the schools were devastated. In January of 2006, I visited Chalmette High in

St. Bernard Parish, which had been used as an evacuation center because it was two

stories tall. When the levees broke, it took less than ten minutes for rushing waters to

reach the ceilings of local homes. Terrified residents climbed onto rooftops or went up to

their attics as the waters kept rising. Some drowned. Those who could took to boats. One

seventh grader at Chalmette, Erika Guidroz, told of being knocked out of her family's

boat and into the rancid floodwaters. She also watched her father and another man peel

back the metal roof on a home to save a woman and her grandson. The woman's husband

and her own son, the boy's father, had already drowned. Some twelve hundred residents

in St. Bernard had sought refuge in Chalmette High School. The school's entire first floor

had flooded. Stranded residents and families had gathered on the second floor, eating

boxes of Froot Loops cereal from the cafeteria and rationing small sips of water. There

were disabled teenagers with ventilators. One elderly man died; a blanket was placed

over his body.

As the waters rose, evacuees began arriving by boat. The school's principal,

Wayne Warner, and the school superintendent, Doris Voitier, lifted scores of refugees

into the building by hoisting them through a second-story window using a yellow plastic

chair. For three days the storm refugees huddled in the school, without working toilets or

a sewer system, until rescue boats reached them. Some first responders were Canadian

police officers, who had sailed down the length of the Mississippi River. In parts of St.

Bernard Parish, other residents waited six days for rescue. They walked through waisthigh floodwaters and were forced to break into local stores to find food. Ironically, in

1927, during the Great Mississippi Flood, St. Bernard and its neighboring parish of

Plaquemines had been decimated by floodwaters on purpose. To save the city of New

Orleans from the raging river, engineers stacked thirty tons of dynamite and blew a hole

in the levee at Caernarvon, Louisiana, to divert the water. In 1927 St. Bernard and

Plaquemines were submerged while the city was saved. This time, none had been spared.

When the waters receded, Doris Voitier and Wayne Warner began cleaning up

Chalmette High School's second floor first. Even with families living in tents and out of

the backs of trucks, they were determined to reopen their school. By the time I visited,

they were still working to remove the mud on the first floor. Lost in the flooding were all

29,000 books in the school's library as well as a complete set of original *Life* magazines.

This little high school had saved every issue since 1936, and they used them as primary

sources to study history. I contacted Ann Moore, the chairman and CEO of Time Inc.,

and in May of 2006 she came with me when I returned to Chalmette. She brought an

entire replacement set of original *Life* magazines, as well as a hundred large, framed

classic *Life* photographs, including twenty-five from New Orleans, such as the iconic

portrait of the jazz great Louis Armstrong. The Laura Bush Foundation also gave the

school two grants to replace its collection of books and materials.

Getting kids back to school, even if it was just a temporary school, was one of the

most important things that could be done to return some normalcy to their lives. I met so

many children who had lost everything but held on to a library book and, weeks or

months later, brought the book back to their school librarian and nervously asked, What

is the late fine? Books matter. Schools matter. And at times like this, I am again struck by

how strong teachers, principals, and superintendents are. They matter in ways we often

take for granted.

It takes years, even decades, to recover from a disaster like Katrina, and the

destruction spared no one in its path. In Mississippi, Democratic congressman Gene

Taylor, who represents Gulfport and Biloxi, lost almost everything he owned. Republican

senator Trent Lott and his wife Tricia's family home was destroyed. At the Congressional

Ball that December, a few in attendance complained to the White House social staff that

we were not serving shrimp--the gulf shrimp industry had been decimated by the

hurricane and there were few shrimp to be had that year. But Congressman Taylor was

reluctant to come with his wife because the ball is black tie, and most of their clothes,

including their dress clothes, had been ruined along with their home. The Taylors arrived

late and stayed off to one side, hesitating to go through the receiving line. My chief of

staff, Anita McBride, spotted them and urged them to walk through, saying, "President

and Mrs. Bush will want to see you." And we very much did.

For eight years, every day that I was in the White House, I walked past the black

lacquer screen that Nancy Reagan had added to the cavernous, yellow upstairs hallway to

make it appear a bit smaller and more intimate in scale. Day after day Bar Bush and

Hillary Clinton had passed it too, and there was great comfort in that continuity. To live

in the White House is to live with your predecessors, with their decorating, their

renovations, their furniture; Bill Clinton's Oval Office couches, re-covered, were now in

our residence upstairs. George and I both pored over biographies and histories of the men

and women who had inhabited these walls; our bedside tables were crowded with books

about their lives. And there was a real solace to these constant reminders of what had

gone before, to know that from within these walls Franklin Roosevelt had faced the Pearl

Harbor attack, Abraham Lincoln had agonized over the Civil War, and tens of other

presidents had struggled with their Congresses and their consciences as well. Our

presidents have overwhelmingly been good and decent men, men who did the best they

could under the circumstances they faced, with the knowledge they had. They loved their

country and wanted the best for it and for the office they held.

I loved the White House. I took great pleasure in the chance to keep and to

conserve it, restoring the elegant silk wall covering in the Green Room that Jackie

Kennedy had selected more than four decades before, or embarking on a project to renew

the library and many of the ground-floor rooms, as well as to restore the Lincoln

Bedroom, working on each space with White House curators and preservationists. I was

delighted too whenever former presidents and their families returned. We had Nancy

Reagan to the White House on several occasions, sometimes to stay overnight in the

Queens' Bedroom. We hosted a ninetieth birthday party for Gerald Ford. And in the fall

of 2005, Lynda Johnson Robb called to tell me that her mother, Lady Bird Johnson,

would be making what was probably her last trip to Washington, D.C. I gladly invited her

to the White House. I had always admired Lady Bird, the first Texas first lady, and had

been so proud that she had recognized the great natural beauty of our home state and

nation. When we drive our vast highways, past waving grasses and blooming flowers,

acres of bluebonnets or black-eyed Susans or Queen Anne's lace, that is the legacy of her

touch, of how she worked to beautify America with native plants and wildflowers.

A series of strokes had left Lady Bird unable to speak or walk. I met her in her

wheelchair with Lynda at the South Portico. Joining me was the retired White House

maitre d', Wilson Jerman, who had worked under President Johnson, and when the two of

them saw each other, they fell into each other's arms. We wheeled Lady Bird inside to the

Vermeil Room, so she could see her portrait hanging above the carved mantel. Her face

broke into the most beautiful smile. When I began redoing the Vermeil Room on the

ground floor, I had asked the painters to adjust the color of the walls to more closely

match the pale gold-yellow of the dress Lady Bird is wearing in her portrait, which also

blends with Jackie Kennedy's pale and elegant column dress in her portrait on the

adjoining wall, so the room is all of a piece.

When we took Lady Bird up to the State Floor to see the portrait of her husband,

she reached her arms out as if to touch him. And as we passed through the rooms, she

would put her hands together and clap lightly or utter a bit of gasp when she saw a piece

of furniture or a painting that she remembered.

By 2007, when the U.S. Department of Education building was renamed in honor

of Lyndon Johnson, who had signed some sixty education acts as president, Lady Bird

was too frail to travel to Washington. George invited her daughters, sons-in-law, and

grandchildren to the bill signing. Inside the Oval Office, he placed a call to Texas so

Lady Bird could listen to the ceremony. George said, "I'm signing this bill right now,

Lady Bird." Then we had the whole Johnson family up to the residence so that Lynda and

Luci, now long grown, could see their old rooms and show their children and

grandchildren the home where they had once lived.

The months of travel during the 2004 reelection campaign had given me time to

reflect, and as I moved about the country, I began to consider what I would like to work

on if George won a second term.

For years I had known that, as a nation, we are not focusing on boys the way we

should. The statistics tell a particularly bleak story: Boys are more likely to drop out of

high school than girls; boys are more likely to have a learning disability; fewer boys than

girls attend college--girls are soon expected to make up 60 percent of all college

undergraduates; fewer young men than young women attend graduate school. Boys are

much more likely to be incarcerated and to get into trouble for drug and alcohol use. In

the last forty years, the nation has entirely rethought how we raise girls, fostering their

belief that they have every opportunity. But we have not given that same thought to boys;

they are still locked in traditions as much as our daughters were two generations ago. And

as they grow into men, the importance of their role as fathers is often demeaned. We

expect men to provide financial support, but many of their other skills have been

marginalized. They are too often viewed as the television caricatures of bumbling,

hapless people, not as vital nurturers.

Yet that is very far from the truth. Since I was a young child, I had seen the

difference that fathers made, in my life and others. I remember my second-grade friend

Georgia, whose own father had died, and how my father would take her and me to the

father-daughter events at school or with the Girl Scouts. And I remembered the many

boys I met on school visits or during other events, such as the twelve-year-old in Austin

who talked to me about not having a dad to play catch with and do the things that dads

do. As he spoke, he struggled with the words; he felt the loss of a father so deeply. And

of course, I had seen the consequences of absent fathers when I taught and worked in

Dallas, Houston, and Austin. When you are missing a parent, you live with a special

sadness for your entire life.

I knew the statistics, I knew the stories, and in August of 2004, I decided that if

George won, I would start a special White House initiative to focus on boys. By January

of 2005, I had expanded that idea to include troubled and at-risk girls as well, but the

major focus remained on boys. George announced the Helping America's Youth initiative

in his 2005 State of the Union speech. The initiative was my responsibility to lead. My

goals were several: to raise awareness about the problems young people face and to

motivate caring adults to connect with our nation's young people in their families,

schools, and communities. I also wanted to examine the myriad of federal programs for

at-risk youth, scattered across twelve departments as diverse as defense, justice,

education, and health and human services. Each agency gives millions of dollars in grants

every year to programs that serve youth. But sometimes programs duplicated each other,

or the effect was unfocused or uncoordinated, and the different agencies did not always

communicate with one another. As part of Helping America's Youth, my staff and I

created one interagency working group, bringing together all these agencies and

government entities so this disconnect would change.

Almost immediately that winter, I began traveling the country to visit some of the

most innovative and daring private programs focused on at-risk youth, such as a Chicago

program that cut shootings by 68 percent in one police district and the largest gang

intervention program in the nation, in Los Angeles. Over the next four years, I would do

fifty separate events around the nation, focused solely on Helping America's Youth.

Starting in the winter of 2005, my staff and I also began planning a major

conference, to be held in October at Howard University, a historically African-American

university chartered in 1867 and located in Washington, D.C. We gathered over five

hundred civic leaders, educators, faith-based and community service providers, teen

experts, and parents to highlight the most serious problems facing American boys and

youth--and to showcase successful solutions. In this way, individual communities would

not have to keep reinventing the wheel. The thought was, where success stories exist, let's

find them and share them, so that more children and teens have a chance. We invited

people from all political persuasions; this is an issue beyond politics.

On the day before the Howard University conference, I sat for an interview with

the *New York Times* reporter Jason DeParle. Jason's beat was poverty and welfare, and on

the campaign trail the previous year, I had read an article he had written for *The New*

York Times Magazine about a young man named Kenyatta Thigpen, who was trying to

turn his life around. Ken had been a drug dealer and pimp who had done time in jail, but

now he had a three-year-old son, and he was determined to be a good parent. He was

trying to become the father that he had never had, even driving a pizza delivery car at

night so that he could be with his boy during the day. I had met Ken, his girlfriend, and

his son in March during a visit to the Rosalie Manor Community and Family Services

Center in Milwaukee. When we met, I told him that this article about his life and

struggles had helped crystallize my thinking about ways to reach out to the young people

who are most in need. Now, as we prepared to open the Howard University conference,

where I had invited Ken to speak, I was also eager to meet the reporter who had first

written about him.

I had long ago resigned myself to what was written about me in the press. First

ladies generally have an easier time than presidents, but that doesn't exempt them from

criticism. In the beginning, much of the commentary focused on how I looked. Whereas

Hillary Clinton was mocked for her hairstyles and headbands, I was told, "Laura Bush is

begging for a makeover" and "She's no Jackie O." On January 15, 2001, before George

had even taken office, *The New York Times* wrote, "Some historians predict that the first

lady she may come to resemble most is Mamie Eisenhower . . . whose division of labor

was simple: 'Ike runs the country and I turn the lamb chops.' And," the *Times* continued,

"Mamie wasn't such a great cook either, but understood the symbolic need to look as if

she were a great cook," thus managing to zing me and Mamie Eisenhower in the same

line.

In March of 2001, *The Washington Post* asked: "Everybody wants to know: Is she

publicly genteel and privately tart? Is she smarter than he is? Does she work to make

herself somehow smaller next to him?" By George's second term, it was lines like *The*

Boston Globe's "Maybe Laura Bush will finally break out of the plastic." I was used to all

of this. It comes with the job.

I was also used to questions that began with negative poll numbers about George,

and then went on to ask "How does that make you feel?" such as when Ed Henry of CNN

said, "But you know what people are saying, which is that your favorability rating in the

latest CNN poll is 68 percent, about twenty-two points higher than your husband. . . .

Does that annoy you?" Or the reporter who began our interview by asking me if I had

ever Googled myself, then proceeded to discuss nasty entries about me that popped up on

a Google search. I was used to having my words reinterpreted, as when, on my July 2005

Africa trip, I was asked if I wanted George to name a woman to Sandra Day O'Connor's

soon-to-be-vacant spot on the Supreme Court. "Sure," I said, "I would really like for him

to name another woman. I know that my husband will pick somebody who has a lot of

integrity and strength. And whether it's a man or a woman, of course, I have no idea." But

the headline was "First Lady Wants New Female Justice," as if I were pointedly

instructing George and drawing a line in the sand.

But I never expected what would happen on the afternoon of October 26, when I

sat down with Jason DeParle in my office in the East Wing. In a tone that was adversarial

and more than a touch offensive, he began by asking, "So what's a nice woman like you

doing with a guy like him?" Meaning Ken Thigpen. It was demeaning to me, and it even

seemed demeaning to Ken. I thought it radiated cynicism, as if Jason did not believe in

the sincerity of Ken's efforts to choose a different path for himself and his son.

In these exact words, Jason later said, "One of the people wrote, this is a *Saturday*

Night Live skit, that people--you're vulnerable to people--being a wealthy woman in the

White House, vulnerable to people rolling their eyes and making fun of your ability to

talk to gang members. What do you think about that? Did that--does that go through your

mind?" And then I recounted yet again that I began my adult career as a twenty-one-yearold teacher working with predominantly African-American kids in inner-city schools. It

was not a new interest. It had been my interest for nearly forty years, while I taught and

while George was governor. But Jason kept on trying to bait me, saying, "Well, that's

what so interesting about your association with Ken. You're not put off that he was a drug

dealer or a pimp in his earlier life?" At that point I was incredulous. The assumption by

this reporter was that he knew all there was to know about me, and that of course, I

couldn't be, wouldn't be, interested in anyone who was different from me. I had already

spent hours talking with ex-gang members. I was happy to meet Ken.

Jason DeParle's tenor suggested that he saw my efforts as some kind of a joke.

His article after the conference was no better. It opened by smugly saying that I was

"wealthy and white," while Ken was "poor and black." As it happens, Jason DeParle

himself is wealthy and white, but does that disqualify him from writing about poverty and

African-American welfare mothers?

There are hardworking, stellar members of the press who cover the White House.

They are highly dedicated to their work under demanding and difficult conditions. Two

journalists, NBC News' David Bloom and *The Atlantic* magazine's Michael Kelly, had

died covering the early days of the Iraq War, David of a blood clot, and Michael in a

vehicle accident.

Many regional reporters from outside Washington also did their homework and

were quite fair. On the national stage, I was always happy to do interviews with the

highly professional Jonathan Karl, Robin Roberts, and Diane Sawyer of ABC News; as

well as Deb Riechmann of the Associated Press; Ann Curry, Matt Lauer, and David

Gregory of NBC News; and Greta Van Susteren and Chris Wallace of Fox News. And in

the early months and years after 9-11, the snide remarks about my looks largely

evaporated. There were far bigger things to discuss. It was the press who had graciously

called me the "comforter in chief."

But as in every White House, from the beginning some in the media came with

preconceived notions and an adversarial point of view. Some of it was sloppiness,

reporters who didn't know an issue and got basic facts wrong. But some of it was bias,

where journalists, rather than being objective, could not put their own emotions and

assumptions aside. Jason DeParle was a classic example of a reporter coming with his

story already written.

And how some journalists saw me often had very little to do with me and very

much to do with how they perceived George. What was written and said about him was

far worse.

The misperceptions about George were manifested in many ways, large and

small. I remember interviewing in February of 2004 with Elisabeth Bumiller, then the

New York Times' White House correspondent. She had just written a piece about George

and John Kerry both being members of the same secret society at Yale. At the end of the

article, Elisabeth repeated a previously circulated story about George's dad appearing at

his son's dorm room door and telling George to join his old society and "become a good

man." But the story wasn't true. Gampy was a congressman at the time. He wasn't

concerned about whether George joined a Yale secret society or not; he certainly didn't

make a special trip to New Haven to speak to George. At the end of our interview, I

asked Elisabeth about the article, and it was clear from her reply that she had never

checked the story herself. But apparently the anecdote was just too good not to use. That

was the problem. While the truth may not be as interesting, it is the truth.

For me, the greatest casualty of this media cynicism was what the press frequently

would not cover: stories of amazing people doing extraordinary things across America.

The people I met and places I visited as part of my Helping America's Youth initiative

inspired me as first lady.

In April of 2005, I traveled to Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles. Founded in

1988 by Father Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest, Homeboy is the largest gang intervention

program in the nation. Los Angeles County is home to eleven hundred gangs, with an

estimated eighty-six thousand gang members. Each year Homeboy opens its doors to

twelve thousand gang members from eight hundred separate gangs. If a gang intervention

program has a 30 percent success rate, it is considered effective. The University of

California-Los Angeles puts Homeboy's success rate at 80 percent. The program has

given tens of thousands of gang members new lives.

"Father Boyle would ride his bicycle into the middle of our gang fights," one of

the young women working at Homeboy told me in 2005, shaking her head in disbelief.

But Father Boyle couldn't ride into the middle of every gang fight. He designed Homeboy

to give ex-gang members, many of whom have criminal records and very little formal

education, a fresh start. His motto, he told me, is "Jobs, jobs, jobs," and his belief is that

if gang members could be taught work skills and could get good jobs, they would choose

a different path. Although drug dealing may look lucrative, Father Boyle contends that

many of the young men and women standing on street corners or working out of

neglected buildings live with enormous anxiety. They fear being shot, being arrested,

being robbed. They fear the people they buy from and the people they sell to. But they

don't know anything else. Getting out is, in fact, a relief.

Homeboy Industries operates five businesses and a solar-panel installation

training program, all staffed with ex-gang members. Homeboy also helps to provide job

training and placement, even things as basic as how to behave on the job and how to

dress. Young people in the program who are not ready for the private work world are

given jobs in the Homeboy businesses, where they can learn everything from landscaping

and T-shirt silk screening to baking and working in restaurants and food service. They

learn how to take direction from a supervisor, how to get along with co-workers, and how

to develop a work ethic. Father Boyle's program provides mental health counseling,

alcohol and drug abuse treatment, anger management programs and domestic violence

classes, ways to get a GED high school degree, and help for people who have recently

been released from jail and need to make the transition from detention to a free life. One

other major component of Homeboy is gang-tattoo removal. Sitting in his spare office

with a simple desk, Father Boyle told me of one young man who came to him when

Homeboy was relatively new and said, "I've got a huge tattoo on my chest that I want

removed." Father Boyle thought for a moment and then replied, "Don't worry. You can

wear a shirt. Tattoo removal hurts. No one will see it." The young man answered, "My

son will."

Thousands of the young men in the program are covered in gang tattoos. Father

Boyle has convinced twelve Los Angeles doctors to remove those tattoos for free; these

twelve doctors conduct four thousand tattoo removal treatments each year.

Father Boyle was one of the people I invited to the conference at Howard

University. He came and brought some of his ex-gang members. It was their first plane

trip and the first time they had ever worn suits. After the conference I invited them to a

reception at the White House. Over the years Father Boyle would travel to Washington

with other ex-gang members, and we always made sure that they could get a White

House tour. Young men who had been in gang fights and had even spent time in jail

could learn that, having started down the path to change their lives, they were welcome in

the most prominent home in the nation.

There were so many other remarkable programs across the nation. Dr. Gary

Slutkin, a physician and epidemiologist at the University of Chicago, had spent most of

his career combating tuberculosis in San Francisco, cholera in Somalia, and AIDS in

Uganda with the World Health Organization before he returned home to Chicago. He

thought he was done with public health crises until he realized that in some Chicago

neighborhoods 20 to 30 percent of children have directly witnessed violence. In other

areas the numbers are even higher. In the South Side of Chicago during the 1990s, as

many as one in four children at three elementary schools had witnessed a shooting; onethird had seen a stabbing. By 2002 Chicago's homicide rate was nearly three times that of

New York. Slutkin's model was to treat violence as an epidemic, like AIDS in Africa. His

program, CeaseFire, works to reduce violence in communities by treating the entire

community.

Whereas in Uganda he had used former prostitutes to spread the message about

AIDS, in Chicago he recruited reformed ex-convicts and ex-gang members. Called

"violence interrupters," they return to the same neighborhoods where they once got into

trouble. If they see a fight or hear of one brewing, they literally interrupt it and say,

"Don't ruin your life over this petty slight," or "Don't shoot someone or pull a knife

because he looked at your girlfriend or because he cut in front of you in line." Slutkin

matches at-risk kids with older trained mentors in their communities, and he brings

together the whole community, law enforcement, clergy, teachers, school administrators,

and parents, so each of them can deliver the message that violence is not accepted here.

They march in the streets to protest after shootings and put up billboards with the pictures

of beautiful young children, saying, "I want to grow up." In its first year, CeaseFire cut

shootings in one police beat by 68 percent. In six communities, it reduced shootings by

42 percent. By 2004 CeaseFire had been implemented in fifteen Chicago neighborhoods.

Within a few years, it would be used in cities throughout Illinois.

After the Howard University conference, my staff and I held six regional

conferences, to highlight more programs and reach more people; in short, to help the

helpers. We searched published reports and interviewed hundreds of experts to find

organizations that were turning around what might otherwise have been tragedies. Each

organization had to have independent statistics measuring its success and a track record

to pass our vetting process. What we found amazed us.

The human needs in parts of our society are so great that fatherhood initiatives

must teach young men the most basic lessons of being a dad. One program I visited in

Kansas taught fathers and their children how to hug. They started with a thirty-second

embrace. For most of these children and their dads, it was the first time they had ever

been wrapped in each other's arms.

I traveled again to Los Angeles to visit Will Power to Youth, a program founded

by Ben Donenberg and sponsored in part by Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson, which uses

Shakespeare to reach at-risk kids. Instead of hanging out with gangs, teens in L.A. are

paid to spend a summer producing a Shakespeare play, building scenery, acting, and

learning Shakespeare. One of the young men I met was hired by Home Depot for its

kitchen design department because of what he had learned designing sets for Shakespeare

plays. I saw a program in Atlanta where Emory University students coach debate teams

in housing projects, to teach kids to use their minds and their words to settle disputes. In

upstate New York, I watched as teenagers were taken through a mock arrest and jury trial

to see how evidence is presented and what their sentences would be for a potential crime.

I played the Good Behavior Game with kids in Baltimore. Dr. Sheppard Kellam helped

pioneer the game; his idea was that many children do not know how to be students; they

have never seen a parent read, have never sat still in a chair to listen. The Good Behavior

Game teaches them how to behave in school.

I also told these success stories to other audiences, speaking to the National

League of Cities, the Big Brothers Big Sisters conference, and other organizations around

the nation. After three years my office had helped to develop a more organized way for

these innovators and pioneers to share their findings and their wisdom. We created a

special website to help new organizations get started and existing ones to expand. And

George signed an executive order to make the special interagency working group

permanent.

There are still gangs, still teenagers going to jail, still children without fathers, but

there are also more people giving their time and their lives to offer kids another path. In

December of 2008, Gary Slutkin of CeaseFire wrote to me, "I believe that someday we

may be able to contain violence, as we have so many other epidemic problems of

history." However difficult that may be, there is no reason not to try.

On November 2, 2005, Prince Charles and his wife, Camilla, came for an official

visit. For their arrival lunch, we served ginger biscuits from Charles's Duchy Originals

food products, which the prince founded to raise money for his personal charities. During

their stay, Charles, Camilla, and I visited the SEED School, a charter boarding school in

Washington, because the prince has a particular interest in education.

In the evening we hosted an official black-tie dinner. State dinners can be held

only for heads of state, thus the only state dinner that can be held for the United Kingdom

is a dinner for the queen, not for the prince or the prime minister. Japanese prime

ministers can have only official dinners; according to protocol, the emperor remains

Japan's head of state. The same is true for many other nations, including those with prime

ministers and presidents. Israel and India, for example, can have official dinners only for

their prime ministers because the presidents outrank them. At our official dinner, the

Marine Band played themes from famous British shows, such as *Reilly: Ace of Spies*, and

Nancy Clarke, the White House florist, and I chose white orchids for the tables because

Charles and Camilla were newlyweds.

From Washington the royal couple was going on to New Orleans, so I invited Joe

Canizaro, a friend of ours from there, who shares the prince's interest in architecture and

planned communities. Also on our guest list was Lieutenant General Russel Honore, the

commander of the Joint Task Force Katrina, who led the Department of Defense's

response to Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita, which followed. The prince, who has

frequently been in the crosshairs of the British tabloids, was particularly amused by

General Honore's story of admonishing the American press, "Don't get stuck on stupid"

during a news conference three days before Rita struck.

Charles's eclectic interests made for a fun guest list; I invited architects, including

Robert Stern, the dean of Yale's architecture school, and writers Red Steagall, the

cowboy poet from Fort Worth, and Azar Nafisi, the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran.*

Afterward, I gave Charles and Camilla signed books from all the authors who had

attended. For our official gift, George gave them each a handcrafted Texas saddle

because of their love of horses. They acted thrilled, but I imagine they must have entire

tack rooms in their stables devoted to the saddles that have been given to them on various

world tours, not to mention the fact that ours were designed for Western-style riding, not

English.

On November 9, the Dalai Lama visited George and me for the second time at the

White House. The Dalai Lama is a dear and gentle man whose example is an inspiration;

he eloquently embodies the hopes for freedom in Tibet. Once, at the White House, he

tickled a ramrod-straight, stoic Marine guard under his chin, saying, "Smile." The Marine

did. But underneath his soft nature is a man who has been denied his rights and his

homeland since he was a boy. He told us that he genuinely feared for Tibet, feared that its

culture would be erased from memory as China resettled vast numbers of its citizens

inside Tibet's mountainous, landlocked region. George believes that acknowledging the

Dalai Lama is a special American responsibility. The world looks to the United States for

leadership, and if we do not stand up for freedom, who will? During his eight years in the

White House, George met with dozens of dissidents from Cuba, Venezuela, China,

Russia, North Korea, Burma, Belarus, and other countries.

For the holiday season, I had chosen the theme "All Things Bright and Beautiful,"

and we decorated the White House with flowers and fruit, plants, and things that people

can find in their yards and gardens. We put pears in our evergreen garlands and on our

centerpieces. After a year of so much natural devastation--a tsunami, Katrina--it was a

way of remembering the special beauty of nature. The White House was filled with

retired staff who came back to work at the Christmas parties, when the sheer number of

guests and events made everything hectic. They had been through so many holiday

seasons that they knew the rhythms, knew when the food tables were running low or how

to ladle punch without dripping. They knew just what needed to be done, and they would

introduce themselves saying, "Mrs. Bush, I am Alfredo. I was here in the Kennedy

administration." That is the type of love and devotion the White House inspires.

At the parties, some guests produced unexpected moments of levity. One woman,

waiting to be screened by the magnetometers as she arrived for a White House function,

asked the Social Office aides if the machine could see that she wasn't wearing any

underwear. Another asked if the machine could tell that she was wearing two pairs of

Spanx, modern-day girdles. And at the Congressional Ball, one of the members coming

through the receiving line told me, "My wife and her friends think you wear a wig." I

looked at him dumbfounded, then smiled and said, "No, it's my own hair," and pulled on

it, just so that he would know for sure.

I had asked the third-generation artist Jamie Wyeth to paint a scene for the official

White House holiday card, and he featured the Andrew Jackson magnolia covered in

snow, with Barney, Miss Beazley, and India the cat in front. When we sent out our

holiday greetings we wished everyone "hope and happiness" for the season and the year

to come.

In any given year, it is possible to count the nationally elected female leaders

around the world using little more than the fingers of two hands. Some of the most

famous female leaders are women who served decades ago, such as Indira Gandhi, Golda

Meir, and Margaret Thatcher. In January of 2006, on Martin Luther King Day, I

represented the United States at the swearing in of Liberian president Ellen Johnson

Sirleaf, the first woman ever elected to lead an African nation. Liberia was founded by

former American slaves, who colonized the west coast of Africa as early as 1820.

President James Monroe asked for U.S. government funds to purchase the original tracts

of land. The Liberian settlements became a haven for slaves freed by the U.S. Navy from

the last of the transatlantic slave ships, and today about 5 percent of all Liberians are

descended from these early settlers, who escaped slavery for freedom and who, in 1847,

created their sovereign state.

But the country's recent history has been brutal and tumultuous. In 1980 a military

coup ushered in a decade of authoritarian rule, followed by rebellion and bloody civil

war. Finally, starting in 1997 the country had two years of calm, until war erupted again

in 1999. It took over three years to achieve another cease-fire and the beginnings of

peace, and the price of conflict has been enormous. Two hundred thousand people died in

the violence; about 1.5 million fled as refugees. Many of the nation's children were

forced to fight as tiny soldiers and had grown up with guns and ammunition rather than

parents.

In 2005, when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected, she was one of only four

previous Liberian cabinet members who had escaped execution. That January morning

she was taking office in a capital city, Monrovia, which had no electricity or running

water, and where it was not safe to stay overnight. Instead, Condi Rice, Barbara, and I

stayed in neighboring Ghana. To reach downtown Monrovia we passed thatched huts

made of woven reeds and roofs that were little more than plastic sheets or corrugated

metal strips, held in place from wind and rain by rocks scattered about the edges.

Liberians lined the road to watch our convoy pass, transistor radios pressed to their ears

for a bit of news. I smiled and waved, and they shyly did so in return.

It was a remarkable moment of promise to see a strong woman inaugurated as the

president of an African nation, a woman so determined to lead her country out of the ruin

of decades of war and conflict. As I read the program for the inauguration, I saw the

irony that Liberia's early leaders, like ours, were born in Virginia or Kentucky or other

Southern states. But while our presidents and statesmen had often been born as sons on

landed estates, Liberia's leaders had been born as slaves. When they came to Africa to

found a new nation, they created its name as well. The word "Liberia" is meant to denote

liberty.

In her inaugural address, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf spoke of how women in Liberia

had long been "second-class citizens," forced to endure rape during the civil wars, forced

to endure the loss of their families and their dignity. She said that she prays for the

reconciliation of the country.

Liberia's last leader, Charles Taylor, had allegedly flown arms traded for

diamonds into the airport while his own citizens fought and killed each other. In July of

2003, George had repeatedly called for Taylor to resign and leave the country. He then

dispatched three American warships with two thousand Marines to Liberia's coast. After

weeks of back-channel diplomacy between the United States and Liberia's neighbor

Nigeria, Taylor was persuaded to leave, and departed Monrovia on August 11. That

summer Charles Taylor did what Saddam Hussein would not the previous spring.

A small group of Marines went ashore to assist West African peacekeepers and to

clear the way for humanitarian aid. The United States was the only Western nation to

provide such direct political and humanitarian help, and many Liberians were grateful to

George; the vice president's wife later told me: "President Bush said 'leave,' and Charles

Taylor did."

In Ghana, I launched the Africa Education Initiative, which linked U.S.

universities with African nations including Ghana, Senegal, Zambia, Tanzania, South

Africa, and Ethiopia. The first partnership was with six minority-serving universities,

most African-American, plus the University of Texas at San Antonio, which is

predominantly Hispanic. Each university shares its expertise and its education department

to develop kindergarten through eighth-grade textbooks written in native African

languages, illustrated by African illustrators, and if possible, printed in each African

country. The presidents and representatives of the American universities--Chicago State,

Elizabeth City State, Tougaloo College, South Carolina State, University of Texas at San

Antonio, and Alabama A & M--joined me at the launch.

As part of the United States' work in international development, we had made a

special commitment to improving education in Africa, where a staggering one-third of

young children do not attend school. American resources help provide textbooks and

teacher training and scholarships so that orphans and other vulnerable children, especially

girls, have a chance at an education. With education we can reduce disease, poverty,

suffering, and violence, and with better education, we can work to stop future genocides.

In sub-Saharan Africa, girls especially are denied the opportunity to learn. In 2005, of the

42 million African children who had never set foot inside a classroom, who did not know

how to read or to do simple math, 60 percent were girls. In fact, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has

made it a priority to teach the sidewalk market women in Liberia the basics of addition

and subtraction so they might earn a better living.

By 2006, the United States had helped provide more than 2.1 million books to

schools and libraries and had implemented programs to train 300,000 teachers. I met with

some of those teachers that January morning in Ghana. Then I visited, as I did in every

African nation, an HIV/AIDS treatment center. Between 3 and 4 percent of all Ghanians

have HIV or AIDS, and as in other African nations, the stigma is particularly great for

women.

It is tragic that while the United States and Western nations have made

tremendous strides on behalf of women and women's rights, many other parts of the

world lag far behind. During a South American summit meeting, when I was attending a

lunch with the first lady of Brazil, she told me that she wanted to work on "birth records."

The translation was spotty, and I thought she said "bird records." I immediately started

thinking of the Amazon, ecotourism, and the fabulous ways that they could protect their

bird species, because I am an avid bird-watcher. And I replied, "Oh, that's great." She

never realized that I thought she was talking about birds when she started. But what she

was discussing was so much more basic yet vitally important. In Brazil and many other

parts of the world, countries do not have adequate data on their populations because they

do not record births or produce birth certificates. Tens of thousands of children,

especially girls, are never counted. Boys may make it into the system eventually because

they join the military, but girls remain invisible. They literally do not count, in nation

after nation around the globe.

Before I left Ghana, I had lunch with President John Kufuor at what was then the

official presidential palace, inside the Osu Castle, or Slave Castle. It was the place where

slaves were shipped to Europe and the Americas, and for years it was where Ghana's

president made his official home. Underground, I saw the small "storerooms" where

Africans were kept chained in the dark, waiting for months for ships to arrive. Many went

blind because, after so much time in the darkness, their eyes were irreparably damaged

when at last they stepped into the brilliant tropical light.

On January 26, 2006, I returned to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, along with

Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, to visit local schools and a playground. I

began at the Alice M. Harte Elementary School in Orleans Parish. It had been one of the

lucky schools, suffering only minimal damage. But it had also experienced "the Katrina

effect" in education. Before the storm, the state of Louisiana had launched a state

takeover of some of New Orleans's most troubled schools. When tens of thousands of

families evacuated the city and temporarily enrolled their children in other school

systems, many parents realized how substandard the city's schools were. Parents and

teachers began to demand better for New Orleans. By November 2005, the Louisiana

legislature gave the state full control of 107 of the city's 128 schools. Within eighteen

months, half of New Orleans's schools would reopen as charter schools, available to all

students but independently operated, with more comprehensive curriculums, and required

to meet strict performance standards. One of the first of these public schools to become a

charter school was Alice M. Harte, where I helped celebrate the return of its students.

My second stop was the St. Bernard Unified School, which had opened its doors

on November 14, 2005, to serve 354 students. That number had risen to 1,500 students,

from kindergarten through high school. This was now the only school in the entire parish.

Some students were traveling from Baton Rouge, ninety miles away, where they had

been evacuated, so they could attend classes in what had been their home. With portions

of the school still being cleaned out from the flooding, teachers and administrators were

using trailers and tents as classrooms. Doris Voitier, the determined school

superintendent, had been unable to get temporary buildings or emergency funds from

either FEMA or the Army Corps of Engineers. But instead of waiting, she took action so

her students could resume their education. In St. Bernard Parish, nearly every school,

home, church, and business had been destroyed by the flooding in Katrina's wake.

In Mississippi, even before the floodwaters had receded, Governor Haley Barbour

had begun putting together a rebuilding commission. Despite the immense devastation,

every Mississippi school had reopened by November of 2005. This January afternoon in

the tiny town of Kiln, the pro football quarterback Brett Favre and his wife, Deanna, were

waiting for me. Favre had grown up in Kiln and had played his first "big-time" football in

its modest high school stadium. Together we dedicated a new KaBOOM! playground,

built by local volunteers that very same day. Through its Operation Playground,

KaBOOM!, a nonprofit that builds play spaces for children in low-income areas, had

pledged to build or restore one hundred playgrounds across the Gulf Coast over two

years. Each project was completed by volunteers. People from around the country came

to the Gulf Coast to help with all aspects of the rebuilding. Jenna and Barbara did as well.

They spent a New Year's in Louisiana, constructing a house with Habitat for Humanity.

On nights and weekends, I had a second career inside the White House: movie

critic. After years of barely being able to squeeze in time for a movie or waiting until it

came to the video rental stores, George and I were now the happy beneficiaries of the

White House movie theater and a supply of feature films from the Motion Picture

Association (movies have been shown in the White House since Woodrow Wilson was in

office). We showed movies to heads of state visiting at Camp David, and Jenna, Barbara,

George, and I entertained the girls' friends with new releases and hot popcorn. We loved

to have the children of the White House staff in to see the latest Disney offering or

movies about Nancy Drew and Kit Kittredge. Each fall, after the National Book Festival,

I would spend Sunday afternoon watching a chick flick or a foreign film with my friends.

My inner movie critic decided that many films were too long and could stand a good bit

more editing; for his part, George did not like films that depended on the F-word for

much of their dialogue.

The White House theater is on the ground floor. For state occasions it doubles as a

coat check, but the rest of the time, it looks like an old-time movie theater, with oversize

red plush seats and a big screen. Our first showing in 2001 was *Thirteen Days*, the story

of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Kennedy presidency. We invited Senator Ted

Kennedy and many members of his family to attend.

In February of 2006, we debuted *Glory Road*, the story of the Texas Western

Miners, one of the first integrated basketball teams and the first to be desegregated in the

South. To win the NCAA championship in 1966, Coach Don Haskins started his five best

players, all African-American, making sports history. We invited the producer and the

central star, but most of our spots were reserved for the former team players and the

family of Coach Haskins. I remembered well the story of El Paso's Texas Western

Miners. For two years my mother had gone to Texas Western, when it was called the

Texas College of Mines and Metallurgy, and I had attended summer school there in 1965.

Afterward, we had the entire team, most of whom were our age, nearly sixty, to dinner in

the State Dining Room, where players reminisced and swapped stories.

February was also the month the Winter Olympics opened in Turin, Italy, and I

led the American delegation, which included a great group of former Olympians: the

skaters Dorothy Hamill and Debi Thomas, the gymnast Kerri Strug, the football star

Herschel Walker, who had competed in the bobsled, and the speed skater Eric Heiden,

who was now the skating team's orthopedic doctor. In Rome, Barbara and I went to meet

the new Pope, Benedict XVI, and all of us visited with our troops stationed at the air base

in Aviano. The troops were thrilled to meet the former Olympians.

As with every international event, there were scattered groups of protesters in

Turin, arrayed against a variety of causes. Most were antiglobalization; some were

protesting Coca-Cola, smog, fast food, and plans for an Italian high-speed train; and some

were protesting the Iraq War. Media reports before the Olympics had predicted largescale demonstrations, but they did not materialize. What protest groups did form stayed

far away from most Olympic sites. But when Brian Williams interviewed me a few hours

before the Opening Ceremony, his second question was: "How much do the protest signs

get to you along the motorcade route?" I told him I had seen only a few protest signs.

And I wondered whether he, tucked away in his broadcast booth, had seen any at all.

Inside, at the ceremony, only the Italian athletes received louder and more

resounding cheers than the American team. Spectators stood and clapped.

I sat with Cherie Blair for the opening, and behind us was the very charming

Giorgio Armani. I spoke no Italian, he spoke almost no English, and the noise from the

celebration was deafening, but we communicated with hand signals and got along fine.

As we were preparing to fly home from Italy, I received word from my Secret

Service detail that there had been an accident on a ranch in Texas; Dick Cheney had

accidentally shot a friend while they were hunting quail. I was sick with worry, for Harry

Whittington, who had been hit, for Dick, and also for George. I asked my chief of staff,

Anita McBride, to call Andy Card, George's chief of staff, though it was the middle of the

night at home. I wanted to urge the vice president's office to state the facts, to be open,

and to answer questions. There was no need to say anything but the truth. Silence, which

was all that was coming from the West Wing, was worse. Dick Cheney did speak to the

press, and Harry Whittington recovered. And it gave George a great joke for his next

black-tie roast: that the vice president had shot the only trial lawyer who'd supported him.

Back home and around the world, there was mounting dissent over the Iraq War,

and George was deeply troubled by how badly the situation inside Iraq had deteriorated.

Iraq had already held two sets of national elections, including one in December of 2005

for a 275-member Council of Representatives. But there were near daily terror attacks

and bombings, and in parts of the country neither our troops nor the Iraqis were safe.

Suicide bombers were killing day laborers and market shoppers, police and National

Guard recruits, and even religious pilgrims at mosques. As many as one hundred Iraqis

would be killed in a single incident. One of the most devastating events occurred in late

February, when bombers struck a holy Shi'ite shrine, the Askariya shrine in Samarra,

some sixty-five miles north of Baghdad. In the weeks and months after the bombing, Iraq

would be crippled by fresh waves of sectarian violence between Shi'ite and Sunni

Muslims. It seemed that each time Iraq began to stabilize, after it held elections, after it

began to form a broad-based government, a new incident or threat would appear and

undermine that precarious stability. How to drive the insurgents out was occupying most

of George's waking hours. This would be a decisive year.

On March 1, Air Force One, with George and me on board, had just finished

refueling in Ireland for a scheduled trip to India and Pakistan. I called my assistant,

Lindsey Lineweaver, into the president's cabin and asked if she could keep a secret. "We

are not going to be landing in New Delhi," I told her. "Air Force One is headed for

Afghanistan."

George and I arrived at Bagram Air Base outside of Kabul and then headed to the

city on board Marine One. Hamid Karzai was waiting for us at the presidential palace

compound. George and President Karzai conferred while I joined his wife, Dr. Zeenat

Karzai, for lunch, a traditional meal of chicken, green vegetables, flatbread, and several

kinds of rice. Just as on my previous trip, we spoke intently about the needs of women,

especially their medical needs. Even something as simple as cooking can be deadly in

Afghanistan. Because so many women cook with primitive fires using highly flammable

kerosene, they often suffer severe burns. Their children are frequently burned too, by

falling into the flames or as a result of kitchen explosions. We discussed mothers' health

and infant mortality. There was still no maternity hospital in Kabul, but I had spoken to

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld after my last trip, and by late 2005, the U.S.

military had set up a program to train midwives in Afghanistan.

In downtown Kabul, George cut the ribbon on the new U.S. Embassy building.

Our day finished back at Bagram with a visit to U.S. troops. At dusk we were in the air

flying to India, where Prime Minister Manmohan Singh appeared at the airport to

welcome us. I was in awe of the enormous presidential residence, the Rashtrapati

Bhavan, which was completed in 1929 by the British as a monument to the permanence

of their rule; eighteen years later, India was independent. The palace's walls contained

700 million bricks and 3 million cubic feet of stone. With 340 rooms and 200,000 square

feet of space, it dwarfs the White House.

Over a whirlwind three days, I made a number of stops. I visited one of Mother

Teresa's homes for disabled children in New Delhi; Mother Teresa's ministry cares for

some ten thousand children, many of them abandoned. The homes are a true testament to

her love for those so many others consider "the least." I chatted with Indian Muppets as

they taped part of *Galli Galli Sim Sim*, their version of *Sesame Street.* George and I laid a

wreath at the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi, then bowed for a moment of silence and

threw rose petals in honor of his memory. Before we departed, Prime Minister Singh and

Mrs. Gursharan Kaur hosted a lovely lunch for us at Taj Palace Hotel. The prime minister

is one of the kindest and gentlest world leaders, a quiet and elegant man, and George and

I were happy that the United States had developed such a warm and rich relationship with

India. At the lunch George stood up and walked with Prime Minister Singh to each table,

to greet everyone in the room. Our final night, the president of India, A. P. J. Abdul

Kalam, held a giant outdoor dinner for us on the perfectly manicured lawns of the

Presidential Palace. Waiters in white gloves served us from overflowing platters of food,

and the grounds were decorated with hundreds of glimmering white lights, echoing the

bright stars above.

From India we flew to Pakistan, where the previous day a bomb in Karachi had

killed a U.S. diplomat. There had also been angry street protests, and the security

surrounding us was so tight we barely glimpsed Islamabad. Our ambassador, Ryan

Crocker, invited George to take a few swings with a cricket bat, but most of the time was

spent on high-level talks with President Pervez Musharraf. At a dinner in our honor, we

watched a beautiful display of folk dancing. But at my table, Sehba Musharraf, the prime

minister's wife, lamented that so many young Pakistanis knew very little about their

nation's arts and culture. When I returned home I reached out to Michael Kaiser, the

president of the Kennedy Center and an arts ambassador for the state department.

Michael flew to Pakistan to offer advice, and later that year Mrs. Musharraf made her

own trip to the United States to attend a Pakistani cultural event at the Kennedy Center. It

was the beginning of a number of fruitful arts partnerships between the Kennedy Center

and other nations around the globe.

In mid-March I returned to New Orleans for a tour of the levees with the Army

Corps of Engineers, who explained where they had been breached and what was being

done to repair them. It was six months after Katrina, and there was still devastation. I also

visited several schools to follow the rebuilding efforts. On May 3, the Laura Bush

Foundation would make its first grants to restock school libraries across the Gulf Coast.

Yet each time I returned to New Orleans, I could see progress. At first it was just

the collection and disposal of debris, but little by little the empty buildings were being

removed or reclaimed. We saw strip malls and groups of stores slowly return to life.

Parking lots that had been empty now had a few cars. Where windows had been dark,

there were bits of light. But there was still so far to go.

That spring Andy Card retired from the White House after over five years as

George's chief of staff. He had served in the post longer than any other chief of staff in

recent White House history. Under incredibly intense pressures, Andy had kept his eventempered and fair style, which earned him bipartisan praise across Washington. We

valued him not just for his skill but for his friendship. We had become especially close

with Andy and his wife, Kathleene. They had spent many weekends with us at Camp

David, invariably leaving late Saturday night or at dawn on Sunday so Kathi could return

to her church in McLean, Virginia, where she was an assistant minister. After 9-11, Kathi

and Alma Powell, Colin Powell's wife, had reached out to the spouses of George's cabinet

secretaries and White House staff. That September many were new to Washington; some

had young children, and now their husbands or wives were gone from their houses and

their lives, working at a breakneck pace seven days a week. Kathi, together with Alma,

who had spent years managing the separation and sometimes isolation that came when

her husband was deployed overseas with the military, gave these spouses refuge, a place

to talk, and a way of supporting each other.

Andy and Kathi's caring, calm, and compassion were and are invaluable to us.

The annual White House Easter Egg Roll dates back to Andrew Johnson's

administration. Then it was just a family affair. Eggs were dyed on Easter Sunday and

rolled along the lawns on Monday morning. The larger gathering of local children, eggs,

and spoons was held on the Capitol grounds. But in 1876, Congress grew tired of divots

in its grass and rotting abandoned eggs. It passed a law forbidding the Capitol grounds to

be used as a children's playground. The roll was rained out in 1877, but in 1878 President

Rutherford B. Hayes opened the gates of the White House to the displaced egg rollers.

Only two world wars and horrible weather have canceled the event since. When they

were six, I had taken Barbara and Jenna to the roll while Gampy was vice president.

By the time George and I arrived at the White House, the roll had become an

elaborate production. We hosted entertainers, including the singers Miley Cyrus and the

Jonas Brothers, as well as magicians and celebrity storybook readers, featuring sports

stars like Troy Aikman of the Dallas Cowboys and cabinet officials. Thousands of small

children rolled their eggs with wooden spoons. As a reward, each would be sent home

with an inscribed wooden White House egg.

For me 2006 will always be known as the year of the great egg caper. That Easter

Monday morning, a member of the Social Office noticed a seventy-year-old lady who

was a longtime volunteer at the roll. Instead of working she was repeatedly visiting the

Porta-Potty on the South Lawn. Concerned, the staffer told a member of the White House

Visitors Office, who walked over and opened the bathroom door. Inside the volunteer

was stuffing masses of wooden Easter eggs into her girdle. The White House staff then

began a search of other senior citizen volunteers and uncovered a widespread ring. The

women were surreptitiously taking the eggs and coloring books into large Porta-Potties

and slipping them under the stalls to a "ringleader," who was hiding the contraband in a

bright yellow trash bag that she had removed from a bathroom trash can. From there they

planned to smuggle them off the grounds. Instead of creating a scene, White House staff

redirected the women to work at the food tent, serving egg salad. The staff then took

down their names, and they were permanently removed from the volunteer list.

Sadly, pilfering was a common problem at the White House. Guests would walk

out of the washrooms with hand towels stuffed in their jackets or purses. One prominent

television personality was known for having a collection of White House paper hand

towels, monogrammed with the presidential seal, in her powder room. She had

"accumulated" them when she came for interviews. Over the years, guests had removed

pieces of flatware to the point where one set of silver engraved with the words "The

President's House" was so popular as a "souvenir" that we used it only in the private

dining room upstairs. Guests also helped themselves to the vermeil eagle place card

holders. After these repeatedly vanished from the dinner tables, we asked the butlers to

remove the card holders before dessert was served. Some visitors even took the dangling

cut glass pieces from the sconces that hung in the ladies' room on the ground floor. There

were times when the social secretary's staff joked that we should have guests walk

through the magnetometers on the way in, and again on the way out.

Occasionally a guest was apprehended before making it onto White House

grounds. One very well dressed woman, who had been placed on a guest list at the

request of a Senate office, was detained by the Secret Service at the entry gate. She had

three federal bench warrants out for her arrest. The warrants popped up when the officers

ran her Social Security number through the database. As the officers led her away in

handcuffs, she insisted upon draping her fur coat over her wrists and hands. Another time

an aide accompanying a preschool tour group was detained because she was in the

country illegally, and one guest's driver was nabbed for having thousands of dollars in

outstanding parking tickets.

There were also moments of entrepreneurial daring, such as the time a group of

singers opened huge black cases inside the Vermeil Room, placed them on the antique

furniture, and began selling jewelry to the other performers right underneath Eleanor

Roosevelt's portrait. They had concealed the jewelry inside their voluminous clothing

bags, and the Secret Service had assumed it was for them to wear.

Some other performers who came to entertain would send over pages of

requirements, down to what type of water they wanted to drink and what snacks they

would eat. One celebrity singer wanted us to create a White House dressing room for

him, complete with a star on the door.

On April 20, we hosted the president of the People's Republic of China, Hu

Jintao, and his wife, Madame Liu, for a state visit. The United States' relationship with

China is one of our most important, and George had his own special Chinese relationship.

His father had served as the U.S. envoy to the People's Republic in 1974-75, after

relations between America and China were reestablished following the Cultural

Revolution and the Vietnam War. As a young man, George had bicycled through the

streets of Beijing. But this morning disaster lurked at every turn. At the arrival ceremony,

President Hu was introduced as being from the Republic of China, which is the official

designation for Taiwan. During the ceremony itself, Wenyi Wang, a forty-seven-year-old

woman who had been admitted as part of the press pool--she had credentials from *The*

Epoch Times, a newspaper that had covered other White House events--stood up and

began to scream at the Chinese leader, denouncing him for his treatment of Falun Gong, a

Chinese religious sect. She yelled, "President Bush, stop him from killing." It took

several minutes for uniformed security officers to remove her--the plainclothes Secret

Service are charged to act only if there is an immediate threat to the physical security of

the president--and until the officers arrived, her curdling, high-pitched cries echoed

across the South Lawn. President Hu and his wife were gracious, but George and I were

embarrassed. There are no do-overs for events like state visits. Controversy can follow

any state leader, not only Americans, abroad.

Two months later we were back on the South Lawn to welcome Prime Minister

Junichiro Koizumi of Japan. Koizumi, who had become our good friend, would be

staying for two days, and that night we planned an official dinner in his honor, with

flower arrangements reminiscent of a Japanese garden, green orchid topiaries rising over

the tops of tall glass cylinders. More than the black-tie evening, we knew Koizumi was

looking forward to the following morning, when we took off from Andrews Air Force

Base for Memphis, Tennessee. He is a huge fan of Elvis, so we had planned a trip to the

King's home, Graceland. Waiting on the front steps to take us through the house were

Priscilla and Lisa Marie Presley, and when Koizumi saw them, he began singing the Elvis

classic "Love Me Tender" to Priscilla. After the tour, we stopped for lunch at the famed

Memphis barbecue restaurant the Rendezvous, where Koizumi donned big gold

sunglasses, hopped up on the stage, and asked a three-piece band to play the Elvis hit "I

Want You, I Need You, I Love You," while his face beamed and he sang along. He was

overjoyed. As a gift, we gave him a 1950s jukebox filled with songs by Elvis and other

rock 'n' roll classics.

My late spring was filled with return trips to New Orleans, projects for Helping

America's Youth, and a UN General Assembly High Level Meeting on HIV/AIDS, as

well as another trip with George to Austria and Hungary. In June, U.S. troops in Iraq had

reached their lowest levels in two years, 125,000, but the violence around the nation was

not abating. On June 13, George made another surprise visit to Baghdad to meet with

Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki. He increased U.S. troop levels and knew that the

2006 midterm election would likely be a referendum on the Iraq War.

We now had two late-summer anniversaries to mark, the one-year anniversary of

Katrina and the five-year anniversary of 9-11.

For the Katrina anniversary, George and I returned to New Orleans on a day that

was bright and sunny with thick, swampy heat. We stopped for hotcakes at Betsy's

Pancake House and visited a school. We also visited the devastated Ninth Ward and

Lower Ninth Ward, which before it was settled had been a low-lying cypress swamp and

early plantation land. Sitting below sea level, and positioned between the Mississippi and

Lake Pontchartrain, the Lower Ninth Ward had been the site of some of Katrina's worst

flooding. More than four thousand homes had filled with water; many had washed away

or been destroyed.

We called on the music legend Fats Domino, who had been born in that ward and

whose rhythm and blues had poured out of my radio when I was a teenager in Midland.

When the floodwaters came, Fats's tan-brick house was engulfed. The waters rose past

the priceless collection of gold and platinum records adorning his walls. Decades of

mementos washed away or were ruined in the flood. One item that had been lost was the

National Medal of Arts given to him by Bill Clinton. Before we left George had asked

Bill whether he would mind if we had the medal recast. Bill was thrilled. So we presented

Fats Domino with a second gold medal, cast from the same mold, and draped it over his

neck.

Our final event was held on the tarmac at the airport, where we met the New

Orleans Saints football team, who were about to play their first game of the season in the

Superdome. A year before, the Superdome had held thirty thousand evacuees from the

floodwaters. Now New Orleans was happily celebrating the Saints' return to the city for

NFL competition.

For the five-year anniversary of 9-11, in addition to the traditional wreath laying

and visit to Ground Zero, we made a special visit to the "Fort Pitt" firehouse to observe

the day with rescuers who were mourning their buddies, some who had been lost and

some who were still scarred by that day.

The UN General Assembly opened immediately after the remembrances for 9-11.

I was there to hear George's address to the UN, and I had a special event of my own.

In 2003 I had been asked to serve as UNESCO's honorary ambassador for its

Decade of Literacy, and my staff was working feverishly to convene a White House

global literacy conference at the New York Public Library to coincide with the United

Nations meeting.

Almost three-quarters of a billion adults in the world cannot read or write; twothirds of the illiterate are women. UNESCO's focus was on the thirty-five countries with

the highest illiteracy rates, where less than half the population can read and write. But

although the problem was easy to enumerate, the solutions are far more challenging. In

2003 UNESCO had announced its goal of increasing global literacy by 50 percent by the

year 2015. By 2005 UNESCO realized that it could not meet its goal. That fact alone

gave this September 18, 2006, meeting particular urgency.

At the New York Public Library, amid great books by some of the finest writers,

the White House Conference on Global Literacy brought together forty-one education

ministers, thirty-two first ladies and spouses, and literacy experts from seventy-five

countries to share information and learn about which programs work best. Among our

presenters was Dr. Perri Klass, a renowned pediatrician who is also the director of the

Reach Out and Read National Center. I had started the organization's first programs in

Texas when George was governor. Reach Out and Read was founded in 1989 by Doctors

Barry Zuckerman and Robert Needlman, along with three early childhood educators.

Pediatricians like Zuckerman, Needlman, and Klass saw the absence of reading and

literacy skills among their young patients and began giving parents "prescriptions" to

read aloud to their children just as they prescribed medicines to combat disease. Each

child is given a free book at every checkup from age six months through five years, about

ten books in all. More than 4,500 Reach Out and Read programs nationwide serve 3.8

million children.

We heard from Dr. Klass about encouraging family literacy and from Florence

Molefe of South Africa about how parents who learn to read and write become role

models for their children. Two other panels discussed literacy for health and literacy for

economic self-sufficiency. Those who cannot read are limited to the most menial jobs,

and they cannot follow simple directions to take lifesaving medication or to administer it

to their children.

Late that afternoon I took some of the presenters down to Wall Street, where we

toured the floor of the New York Stock Exchange and I rang the exchange's closing bell.

It was a far cry from my first visit with Regan, nearly forty years before. Traders on the

floor applauded, and I leaned over to shake their hands. But not quite everything had

changed. I smiled when I saw that *The Wall Street Journal* began its coverage by

reporting that I was wearing "a pink skirt-suit."

The United States is the world's largest supporter of public health improvements

overseas. We generously provide medicines, materials, training, and lifesaving aid. Our

hospital ships set sail for the Indonesian coast to treat tsunami victims or Haiti after a

devastating earthquake. American doctors spend their vacation weeks in Africa or Asia or

South or Central America, treating those who otherwise would not have care and

performing operations, like eye surgery that returns a patient's sight. Two American

doctors, twins named Vance and Vince Moss, have traveled twice at their own expense to

Afghanistan. Working sometimes in caves and in bombed-out buildings, with only

flashlights and cell phones to see by, they have operated on sick and injured Afghan men,

women, and children. When villages heard they were coming, hundreds would line up to

be seen by the men they called the "same-face healers." Through the passionate work of

private citizens like the Mosses, private foundations, and government programs, the

United States shares its ingenuity and know-how to save lives. Fortunately, we are not

alone. French doctors helped to found Medecins Sans Frontieres, or Doctors Without

Borders, in 1971; it now operates in nearly sixty nations. Israeli doctors created Save a

Child's Heart, the world's largest global pediatric heart surgery program, which operates

in Africa, China, Jordan, Iraq, Vietnam, and the former Soviet republics, and also treats

hundreds of Palestinian children.

Yet in 2006, every day around the world, 3,000 children under the age of five

were dying from malaria; 1.5 million lives were lost each year. Hundreds of thousands of

children and adults were succumbing to malaria comas and never waking up. Malaria,

which is transmitted by a single mosquito bite, is a preventable disease. The United States

eradicated malaria from our swamps and lowlands in the early part of the twentieth

century; before then Washington had regular malaria outbreaks. George's greatgrandparents the Walkers, who lived in St. Louis, started going to Maine in the summer

to avoid malaria outbreaks along the Mississippi River.

In the twenty-first century, we know that systematic programs can wipe out the

mosquitoes and arrest transmission of the disease. Something as simple as sleeping under

a bed net or treating infested areas with insecticide can greatly reduce malaria outbreaks.

But in some of the poorest countries in the world, very little was being done to combat

malaria, which is every bit as deadly as AIDS. George wanted to change that. In June of

2005, he announced the President's Malaria Initiative, which focused on combating

malaria in fifteen of the world's hardest hit nations, where more than 80 percent of all

malaria deaths occur. To receive aid and funds, these nations' governments had to

become active partners in malaria eradication.

Eighteen months later, the President's Malaria Initiative was entering its next

phase. As we had done with Helping America's Youth, I wanted to get all of the

organizations that were addressing malaria to meet in the same room on the same day. On

December 14, for the first time, experts from the World Health Organization, the World

Bank, and UNICEF met with Admiral Tim Ziemer, director of the president's initiative,

as well as with representatives from private foundations, such as Malaria No More and

the Gates Foundation, which was announcing $84 million in new grants; it had already

spent $682 million to combat the disease. They came together as part of the White House

Summit on Malaria, which I led at the National Geographic Society. Our goal was

simple: cut malaria deaths by one-half across these fifteen nations and share the resources

and knowledge to do it.

Already there were signs of progress. After the initiative began, communities on

the island of Zanzibar reportedly cut their infection rates from 45,000 cases to near zero

in a mere four years. When George left office, the overall number of malaria deaths

among children under five had dropped by one-third in both Zambia and Rwanda. And

on the island of Zanzibar, where just three years before, 22 percent of all children seen in

local health clinics had tested positive for malaria, now that number was less than 1

percent. I thought of the female leaders I'd met in Rwanda, all of whom had contracted

malaria. Now their children might be spared. Thanks to the compassion of the American

people and the President's Malaria Initiative and its partners, there are now tens of

thousands of mothers who no longer have to weep over the death of a child from an

entirely preventable disease.

The week before the malaria summit, I was reminded of the less than life-or-death

issues that dominate the news from the White House. My ultimate in clothing faux pas

received about as much attention as the summit. The dress debacle occurred on December

3, 2006, at a White House reception before the Kennedy Center Honors, and the guilty

party was a red Oscar de la Renta gown. George and I were standing for the long

receiving line greeting guests when I saw a good friend of mine from Houston. She was

wearing the identical red lace dress. We posed for the camera with slightly awkward

smiles. A few minutes later a friend from Washington walked through in the exact same

gown. Then came a good friend of mine from California. Now there were four of us in

the identical dress. We tried to turn it into a lighthearted moment, and the four of us

gathered for a group photo, but I could tell that no one was amused. I had chosen the de

la Renta gown because it blended so nicely with the brilliant red of the Kennedy Center's

interior. But after the last camera click, I raced upstairs to change into a navy blue dress

from the back of my closet to wear to the awards ceremony.

Thus continued my fashion education. It had started when the press made fun of

the purple suit I wore to that first White House visit with Hillary Clinton. After that I had

begun visiting New York fashion houses; my favorites were Oscar de la Renta and

Carolina Herrera. I paid for all my own clothes and took to attaching an index card to

each outfit, writing down what event it had been worn to, so that I could avoid

duplications. Each season my assistant would remind me of the different occasions for

which I would need a new dress or outfit: state dinners, annual galas, and the like. I

would glance through the designers' "look books" and make selections, usually asking

that the color or style be slightly altered. But in the book, that red dress had looked

perfect. It had vaguely crossed my mind that someone else might see the dress and think

exactly the same thing, but what were the odds of that woman wearing it to a White

House party? I let the thought pass from my mind until December 3. Unfortunately, no

one else had thought to check on how many of the red lace dresses had been sold around

the country, and one of the women who wore hers to the White House that night was so

infuriated that she returned it to the store and demanded they give her a refund.

My dress, however, had a long life. Not only did I wear it for the official White

House holiday photo but I sent it to travel the country as part of the Heart Truth Red

Dress campaign to raise awareness about heart disease.

When I arrived in the White House, if I had been asked what was the leading

cause of death among American women, I would have replied cancer. But the correct

answer is heart disease. In 2003 heart attacks and related diseases were responsible for

one out of every three female deaths in the United States. Very few American women

knew this devastating statistic, and thousands of doctors were insufficiently aware of the

risk for women's heart health. Most modern heart procedures, like stents and angioplasty,

had been developed for men. Even the instruments used by heart surgeons were designed

to fit men's far larger arteries and veins. At the start of 2003, Dr. Elizabeth Nabel of the

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute asked me to be the ambassador for Heart Truth,

a campaign to educate women about the risk of heart disease, and what they could do to

prevent it. The keys to prevention are exercising, maintaining a healthy weight, quitting

smoking, and monitoring blood pressure and cholesterol. I immediately said yes.

My first message was that women's heart attack symptoms may be different from

men's. For women, common symptoms are often extreme fatigue and pain in the neck or

the jaw, not just pain in the arm or the chest, the most frequent symptoms for men. In

September 2003, I visited St. Luke's Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri, where I discussed

the warning signs of a heart attack. A local woman named Joyce Cullen watched me on

television. That night, as she was getting into bed, Joyce began to feel ill. She

remembered what I had said and told her husband to pray and rush her to the hospital.

Doctors performed heart surgery and saved her life. Joyce joined the Heart Truth

campaign and began speaking to local churches and women's groups to try to save other

lives. In February 2004, I invited her to the White House to help me launch American

Heart Month. I heard from other women as well. A daughter told me how her mother's

life was saved after they watched me discuss heart attack warning signs on the *Rachael*

Ray show. Another woman dialed 9-1-1 because of an article I wrote in the *AARP*

Bulletin. This is the remarkable platform that a first lady has. By 2005 women's deaths

from heart disease had fallen to one in four. The heightened attention in the media,

especially in women's magazines, to heart health and the national effort to educate

women and their doctors saved countless lives.

The Heart Truth campaign put me on the cutting edge of fashion when I unveiled

its Red Dress Project during New York City's famed Fashion Week. More than one

hundred top models and celebrities have walked the runway in red dresses to highlight

the importance of heart health. Today the red dress emphasizing heart health has become

almost as iconic as the pink ribbon for breast cancer. And my now famous 2006 Kennedy

Center red dress has traveled the country to remind women to care for their hearts.

That December, George and I hosted a retirement dinner at the White House for

Kofi Annan, the outgoing secretary-general of the United Nations. America has a long

history with the UN; during the darkest days of World War II, President Franklin

Roosevelt was the one to coin the name United Nations, and the organization's charter

was signed in San Francisco in 1945. Kofi Annan had been a fierce opponent of the Iraq

War but a good ally in working to combat violence, disease, and illiteracy around the

globe.

During dinner in the upstairs Yellow Oval Room, Kofi Annan asked me about the

protesters who gather in Lafayette Park, across from the White House. He was most

likely thinking of antiwar protesters, but in fact, many of the people who come in sun,

rain, sleet, and snow are not protesting against something but are imploring the American

president to do something. Many are pro-democracy protesters, demonstrating on behalf

of freedom. We heard the chants of protesters asking George to do more to support

human rights in Vietnam. "Mr. President," they called, "please say, 'Vietnam must be

free.'" We heard voices calling for an end to political imprisonment in China or freedom

for Tibet. Ethiopians came to hold candlelight vigils to call for greater freedoms and an

end to civil war. We would look out and see hundreds of their flames waving in the

darkness. Week after week people came asking for the United States to use its power and

influence to make lives better in other corners of the world. They did not come out of

anger or hate, I explained, but out of hope. Kofi Annan looked vaguely surprised, then

nodded his head.

The theme of Christmas 2006 at the White House was "Deck the Halls and

Welcome All," and the decor was primarily red. The tree in the visitors' reception room

and another outside the Oval Office were decorated with ornaments made by artisans in

the North Carolina community of Spruce Pine, which had been hard hit by the loss of

manufacturing jobs when local textile factories shut their doors. Helped by a generous

donation in 2003 from Gloria Houston, who wrote *The Year of the Perfect Christmas*

Tree, Spruce Pine had established nearly one hundred small businesses dedicated to

producing handmade Christmas decorations. They called their economic development

program the Home of the Perfect Christmas Trees. I chose their hand-blown red glass

balls and Carolina snowflakes, woven from colored reeds. Roland Mesnier returned from

retirement to make the gingerbread White House, using over three hundred pounds of

dark chocolate and gingerbread and adding eight hundred hand-piped snowflakes. At the

Hanukkah party, the Marine Band played the traditional Jewish tune "Hava Nagila," and

guests began dancing the hora in a large circle around the central hall. To inscribe our

holiday card, a scene of a glowing Oval Office exterior bathed in a fresh coating of snow,

painted by the landscape artist James Blake, I chose Psalm 119, "Thy word is a lamp unto

my feet, and a light unto my path."

For George and me, the holidays were once again the season of receiving lines,

where we spent long hours shaking hands. To manage the receptions, sometimes two in a

single night, Blake Gottesman, George's personal aide, started the practice of counting

how many photos were taken in an hour. During the early parties of the season, we

averaged about fifteen seconds per photo, but as the weeks progressed, we, and the everlonger lines, would whittle that down to about seven seconds. Each morning our staff

would e-mail around the numbers from the previous night, but even at seven seconds, we

could be standing, shaking hands, and smiling for hours in a single evening, so that every

guest had a chance to be greeted by the president and the first lady.

For several years during the month of December, I had noticed pain in my left

forearm. I brushed it off as coming from too many hours spent standing and holding my

arm at my side. But this year, the pain continued into the spring, and it escalated after my

hiking trip in Zion National Park. I scheduled an MRI, and the White House doctor,

Richard Tubb, told me that I had a pinched nerve in a cervical vertebra. In August of

2007 the chief of neurosurgery at the George Washington University Hospital scraped

away bone spurs and calcification that were pressing on the nerve in my neck. For the

first time in months, I woke without any pain. Pinched nerves are harbingers of creeping

age, and even though this required surgery, the press interest was not nearly as intense as

when I had a small squamous cell skin cancer lesion, likely the result of too many hours

spent around the Ranchland Hills Country Club pool in Midland, removed from my shin.

One of the White House correspondents caught sight of my postsurgical Band-Aid and

asked me if I had been bitten by Barney.

In 2006, as always, we spent Christmas at Camp David with the girls and much of

our extended family, and George made phone calls to our troops overseas. In November,

following the midterm elections, George had replaced Secretary of Defense Donald

Rumsfeld with former CIA chief Robert Gates. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein's yearlong trials

had concluded; he was scheduled to be hanged on December 30. But that was not enough

to turn the tide of bombings and violence; three thousand American troops had died since

the war began. At this stage, George was convinced that the United States needed a new

strategy. Many Americans now blamed him for the war; the attacks were shrill and

personal. For popularity's sake, it might have been easier to withdraw U.S. forces, but the

easy course is not always the right one. Instead, George chose to implement a policy

known as "the surge."

On January 10, 2007, he announced to the American people that he had decided to

commit some twenty thousand more U.S. troops to Iraq, to protect the Iraqi population, to

isolate the extremists, to push the Iraqis to lead, and to create space for political progress.

More than 70 percent of eligible Iraqi citizens had voted in the last election, but the

nation still had a long road ahead.

Many in and out of government, including prominent Republicans and nearly

every Democrat, opposed the surge. Many inside George's administration also disagreed

with the plan. It was a hard and lonely decision, and it was one of his bravest moments in

office.

Day in and day out, the criticism of George from all sides was withering. He was

denounced and caricatured in ways far worse than his father had been. I survived it

because George did. He is not a self-pitying man. He is not a man of outsize ego or

arrogance, despite what his critics said. He simply did what he believed to be right and

expected to be judged based on outcomes and history, not by daily headlines or pundits

on talk shows. But it was still painful to see the man I loved, the man I knew, so

misrepresented by his opponents to the American people. And the hardest part was

knowing that our daughters saw it too. The dad who had held them as babies, who had

loved them unconditionally, was now the target of mocking late-night comics and near

hysterical cable television hosts. It hurt me to think of our daughters picking up the

newspaper or reading the Internet or walking into a room where the television was on.

Their resilience in the face of this onslaught was remarkable. As a family we have

listened to some of the worst things that can be said about us or someone we love, and

never has our own love dimmed. But what we endured is a meanness of spirit, a

viciousness, and a cruelty that I hope no political family will ever be subjected to again.

We could do nothing but wait and hope for the tide to turn. Our friends and our

family waited with us. George had the unwavering love and support of his parents. He

also had the special companionship of his youngest brother, Marvin, who lived in nearby

northern Virginia. On the weekends, Marvin would call and say, "There's a great game

on, why don't we watch it together?" The two of them could lose themselves in sports for

an hour or two, and in that easy way that brothers have, the unspoken language of

friendship would pass between them. I had my sisters-in-law. Margaret Bush, Marvin's

wife, came several times during the week when I was in Washington to exercise with me

in the White House gym. George's sister, Doro Bush Koch, and her husband, Bobby, and

their children frequently came for dinner and joined us at Camp David. The richness of

their friendship and their love for me and for George was of great solace as we waited for

improvement in Iraq. The Bush children had seen their father lead the nation during the

Gulf War; now it was their brother, in a longer, more difficult fight. They understood, as

few people could, the burdens of leading a nation in wartime. And this was a war unlike

any our country had ever faced.

In World War II, we knew that if we crippled the enemy in one place, other fronts

would weaken and eventually collapse. During the Cold War, the United States could

cede some countries, such as Cuba or Eastern Europe or Vietnam, or even Afghanistan up

until 1979, to the Soviets' sphere, and still the fundamental balance of power would

remain unchanged. Yet in this new type of war, against not an army in uniform but a

radical ideology bent on destroying the very framework of our shared civilization, we

could not write off one country to the enemy. Never before in history had such small

numbers possessed the potential to inflict such horrific damage. So wherever the

terrorists were plotting destruction, we had to engage them. And wherever terrorist cells

might be trying to gain a foothold, we had to turn them back. It was a war of terrorist acts

and a contest of ideology, and we could not win unless we met them firmly on every

front. We could not let Iraq fail, or let the United States fail in Iraq. We could never again

allow a full-fledged haven for terror to flourish if we wanted to protect Americans inside

the borders of our own nation. Nor could we give up on the millions of Iraqis who were

hoping that the extremists would be turned back and a free society would have a chance

to take hold. George chose the best way he thought to win, and we waited. And we

prayed for the men and women who had pledged to fight for our country and for our

freedoms.

The nasty personal criticisms of George had begun in earnest in 2004. In a May

2004 interview with her hometown paper, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Nancy Pelosi,

the leader of the Democratic Party in the House of Representatives, said, "Bush is an

incompetent leader. In fact, he's not a leader. He's a person who has no judgment, no

experience and no knowledge of the subjects that he has decided upon." She went on,

"Not to get personal about it, but the president's capacity to lead has never been there. In

order to lead, you have to have judgment. In order to have judgment, you have to have

knowledge and experience. He has none." In 2005, after being invited to a meeting at the

White House, she called George "dangerous." Meanwhile, the Democratic leader in the

Senate, Harry Reid of Nevada, called George a "loser" and a "liar." Subsequently, in a

private, one-on-one meeting in the White House Cabinet Room, Reid said to George that

he would stop calling him names. But he didn't stop. And he later told both *Rolling Stone*

and then *The New York Times Magazine,* with apparent pride, that he had "never"

apologized for the liar comment.

These two congressional leaders also made those statements about the sitting

United States president when the country was at war, though as George and I knew,

similar invectives had been hurled at presidents during wartime from the earliest days of

our republic. Franklin Roosevelt had complained that "every senator is a law unto himself

and everyone seeks the spotlight." Interestingly enough, when Pelosi and Reid were

asked to suggest their own policy proposals, their answer invariably was withdraw from

Iraq immediately, whatever the consequences.

Nevertheless, George and I repeatedly invited Harry and Landra Reid and Nancy

and Paul Pelosi to the White House. They came for small gatherings and for black-tie

dinners, and received invitations to major state events. When the Queen of England

visited in the spring of 2007, Nancy Pelosi danced in the White House in her long ball

gown.

Of course, I hated hearing all those terrible things said about my husband. The

comments were uncalled for and graceless. While a president's political opponents, as

well as his supporters, are entitled to make what they see as legitimate criticisms, and

while our national debates should be spirited, these particular words revealed the very

petty and parochial nature of some who serve in Congress. George, as president, would

never have used such language about them. It demeans honest debate; it debases the

office of the presidency; and just as importantly, it does little to produce good decisions

or good policy. George did not use interviews to call political opponents "losers" or

"liars," and if he had, the outcry would have been enormous. The president doesn't have

the luxury of behaving like a smart-aleck kid on a school playground; he has to work not

just with Congress but with leaders around the world. The cockiest thing George did was

say that he wanted to get Osama bin Laden "dead or alive."

Pelosi and Reid and others got to say whatever they wanted, and George and I

were still polite. We still shook their hands in receiving lines and posed for photographs,

and George did not exclude them from important meetings or White House events. He

respected the offices that they held. Indeed, past congressional leaders, including Senator

Lyndon Johnson and then Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, who was a vocal

critic of Johnson's during Vietnam, took great care not to utter uncivil words about their

presidents in public.

In the Texas statehouse, the governor's office sits in the middle. George could

walk down the hall to speak to legislators all the time, and he did. He worked in a

thoroughly bipartisan manner. As president, George had great appreciation for the

separation of powers, which lies at the heart of how our government works. But in

Washington, Capitol Hill was like its own fiefdom, a cacophonous place where no one

House member or U.S. senator has the ultimate responsibility for anything. No one has

ultimate responsibility for our national security or for our economic security. It is easy to

throw mud and pass the buck when there are 534 other people to hide behind. George

didn't have that luxury. Every problem in the world comes to the desk of the President of

the United States.

On the night of February 11, 2007, as Washington lay huddled under a deep chill,

we lit the lights on the East Entrance and welcomed guests to celebrate Abraham Lincoln,

on behalf of Ford's Theatre and the Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial celebration. Senator

and Mrs. Harry Reid were two of our guests.

The White House in winter looks like something out of Abraham Lincoln's time,

with the soft glow of light bathing it in creamy whites. Marine guards moved with

precision as each vehicle approached. In long dresses and tuxedos, the guests walked

across the shiny tiled floors of what is called the booksellers' corridor on the ground

floor. They then climbed the marble stairs up to the formal State Floor. Time and again,

at this event and at many others, people's eyes would overflow as they reached the State

Floor. To walk through the corridors, to enter the Green, Red, and Blue rooms, to stand

where our own leaders have stood for generations is a deeply patriotic and moving

experience. But tonight we had also invited them upstairs to see the Lincoln Bedroom

and Sitting Room, whose renovations were now complete. In Lincoln's day, the room had

not been a bedroom but the president's official office.

Working with the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, I had recreated the rug based on photographs of an 1861 English carpet that was in Lincoln's

office. We commissioned it from the same company that had woven his original rug.

Hand-blocked wallpaper that approximated Lincoln's office design was used for the

walls, and we reproduced the room's period marble fireplace mantel, which had been

discarded in 1902. The bedroom furniture suite that we used had been purchased by Mary

Todd Lincoln, and every other piece in the two rooms had been part of the White House

collection when the Lincolns resided here. In the sitting room, I installed the only marble

Victorian-era fireplace mantel that had survived the numerous White House expansions

and renovations. On a simple Victorian desk in a corner of the bedroom, we displayed the

fifth and last known copy of the Gettysburg Address written in Lincoln's hand. He had

made this copy so that his words might be sold at auction to raise money to buy bandages

for wounded Union troops.

In this room, on January 1, 1863, Lincoln had signed the Emancipation

Proclamation, and night after night he had waited for word on his war. For this night, I

had asked the Marine Strings to play a selection of Lincoln's favorite songs, including

"Dixie." As the melodies drifted upstairs, echoing about these pieces of our history, some

of the guests wiped tears from their eyes.

Three weeks later, on March 1, 2007, I was landing in the pitch darkness in a

small Air Force plane on Midway Island, scene of one of the most bloody and decisive

naval battles of World War II in the Pacific. Today the guns are silent and the island is

the centerpiece of one of the largest environmental conservation efforts on earth. Midway

is home to eighty people and about 400,000 pairs of Laysan albatross, as well as tropic

birds, black noddies, white terns, and other nesting and migratory birds. In Hawaiian, the

island has long been called Pihemanu, or "the loud din of birds." From November

through July, planes are not allowed to land or depart during daylight because of fears

that birds in flight will be sucked into the engines.

In the blackness, my staff and I rode on golf carts to aging military barracks; I

spent the night in a tiny house belonging to Barry Christenson, the manager of Midway

Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, and his wife, Elise. When I awoke, it was to a deserted

island paradise of gleaming sands and rustling palms, with waters so clear that it was

possible to see the fish beneath. We had to watch each step we took, for fear of stepping

on an albatross nest or a young chick. On Midway Island the albatross have no natural

predators; the danger to them comes instead from the seas. Parents fly low over the water,

skimming the ocean top for fish and squid. They eat what they catch, then regurgitate the

half-digested food to feed their babies. The tragedy is that an albatross cannot distinguish

between a squid and a piece of floating plastic. Scattered across the sands and grasses

were abandoned albatross nests and chick carcasses, the remains of bird babies who had

died after being fed. John Klavitter, a wildlife biologist, opened the partially decomposed

bodies. Inside were plastic bottle caps and other refuse, including toothbrushes, cigarette

lighters, and plastic tires from a child's toy.

Ocean currents in the Pacific have created a plastic garbage dump estimated to be

twice the size of Texas. Most of its contents float just under the swells of the waves,

where bits and pieces are ingested by bird and marine life. The Department of the Interior

and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, as well as other U.S.

agencies, are working to mitigate this plastic debris and prevent new trash from

accumulating. Twenty-one tons of debris had been collected around the Hawaiian Islands

in 2006. But so much more needs to be done; there are 6.4 *million* tons of trash polluting

and destroying our global marine habitats.

In 2006 George had designated nearly 140,000 square miles of these vulnerable

Pacific waters as a marine national monument. It is the single largest U.S. conservation

area, bigger than all our national parklands combined. Among the string of tiny islands

and atolls in these waters, Midway Island is the only spot inhabited by humans. But the

entire region is home to some 14 million seabirds and seven thousand marine mammals,

nearly two thousand of which cannot be found anywhere else on earth. The next morning,

in Honolulu, I would christen the monument with its Hawaiian name, Papaha-naumokuakea.

On the Midway atoll, after stepping carefully around the albatross nests, Interior

Secretary Dirk Kempthorne and I knelt in the dirt to replant native plants that were being

crowded out by invasive species attacking the shores, another environmental danger. I

stood in the water in my bare feet and fed endangered Hawaiian monk seals, of which

only about thirteen hundred remain. And I saw the rusting antiaircraft guns and shell

craters, the pitted runways and weapons depots where American soldiers and sailors had

won their first major victory against the Japanese. We paused in silence to remember as

the wind and birdcalls reverberated in our ears.

At the start of 2007, we received word that Queen Elizabeth of England wanted to

make another visit to the United States, and the White House immediately sprang into

action to host a state dinner in her honor. The preparations involved two social

secretaries, Lea Berman, who was departing after over two years of service, and Amy

Zantzinger, who would be with us through the remainder of George's term. We invited

the violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman to play for the queen. We decorated the State Dining

Room with white roses in vermeil vases and used the gold-edged Clinton china. Our

menu tastings, with our talented White House chef Cris Comerford, were done weeks in

advance, and everything was designed to showcase the best of America with a nod to

British favorites, from spring pea soup with caviar to a first course of Dover sole,

followed by lamb with seasonal, local vegetables and salad. And the dinner was to be

white tie. George of course didn't want to wear white tie, but at Buckingham Palace,

Prince Philip and the queen's guests had donned them for us. So Condi Rice and I made

an executive decision that this evening would be white tie as well, much to George's

chagrin.

The arrival ceremony was perfect, under blue skies, with a twenty-one-gun salute

and a parade by the Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps. That afternoon, Queen Elizabeth,

followed by George, greeted dozens of British expatriate and American schoolchildren,

who came bearing flowers and shyly asking for autographs. We had invited Bar and

Gampy to join us, and when the queen asked to visit the newly opened World War II

Memorial, we suggested Gampy as her escort. The eighty-two-year-old World War II

fighter pilot lent his arm to the woman who had been a beautiful teenage princess when

the war raged. Then Princess Elizabeth had volunteered to drive and repair heavy

transport vehicles only after her father, King George VI, refused her request to become a

nurse. Now Gampy and the queen walked slowly through this monument to their shared

past.

The guest list for this dinner was fun to compile, particularly the invitation I was

waiting until the very end to extend. The queen is a fan of horse racing, and she had

attended the Kentucky Derby the weekend before coming to the White House. I watched

the derby on television, and the moment it ended, I called Amy Zantzinger with a request:

invite the winning jockey, Calvin Borel. When she finally reached him, he thought it was

a joke. Amy convinced him that indeed the White House was calling, and he said yes, he

would attend, but he and his fiancee, Lisa Funk, had nothing to wear. After they heard

about the invitation, the stores in Louisville, Kentucky, where the derby is run, stayed

open on Sunday so that Lisa could find a dress. For Calvin, Amy arranged to rent a set of

white tails from the same man who was outfitting George for the evening.

Both Calvin and Lisa were beaming when they walked through the receiving line,

and then Calvin did the sweetest thing. It is strict protocol not to touch the queen, not

even to shake her hand, until she extends hers to you first. But as Calvin stood between

the queen and me, he wrapped his arms around both of us for the official photograph. All

during the dinner, I could see Calvin and Lisa at a nearby table, and they looked so

happy. He had his arm draped over her and an expression of bliss, winning the Kentucky

Derby on Saturday, and on Monday night dining with the Queen of England at the White

House.

On the evening of June 5, George and I landed in Heiligendamm, Germany, site

of the country's oldest seaside spa, nestled on the coast of the Baltic Sea, for the G8

Summit. I arrived and began my events, but by the afternoon of the seventh, I could

barely stand up. My head inexplicably throbbed; I was horribly dizzy and nauseated. I

went to bed, pulled up the covers, and for several hours felt so awful that I thought I

might die right there in that hotel room.

I was not the only one to fall ill. Over the next day nearly a dozen members of our

delegation were stricken, even George, who started to feel sick during an early morning

staff briefing. For most of us, the primary symptoms were nausea or dizziness, but one of

our military aides had difficulty walking and a White House staffer lost all hearing in one

ear. Exceedingly alarmed, the Secret Service went on full alert, combing the resort for

potential poisons. In the past year, there had been several high-profile poisonings,

including one with suspected nuclear material, in and around Europe. The overriding fear

was that terrorists had gotten control of a dangerous substance and planted it at the resort.

After my stay in bed, I managed to get up and return to the summit. George, who

almost never gets sick, refused to postpone a meeting with French president Nicolas

Sarkozy, but he canceled a press conference and remained in his room to rest during the

G8's final morning meeting. Indeed, George felt so ill that he met with Sarkozy in his

hotel room and did not even stand up to greet him. Sarkozy walked over to the sofa to

shake his hand and then sat nearby. The White House press office announced to the

media that the president had contracted some kind of virus or stomach flu. European

papers began scrutinizing every meal that George had eaten and even examined the Baltic

fish that had been served.

We all recovered, although a few of the staff had lingering aftereffects; our

military aide's gait has never returned to normal, nor has our senior staffer regained full

hearing in that ear. The most concrete conclusion any doctors could reach was that we

contracted a virus that attacks a nerve near the inner ear and is prevalent in

Heiligendamm. But we never learned if any other delegations became ill, or if ours,

mysteriously, was the only one.

Later in June, I returned to Africa, to follow the progress of the President's

Malaria Initiative and our work to combat AIDS through PEPFAR. Jenna came with me.

She had just spent the better part of a year working with UNICEF in Central America,

where she had met an AIDS orphan who she called Ana, a young woman who had

suffered the trauma of contracting HIV/AIDS from her mother at birth and then lost both

parents to the disease. As a teenager, Ana was sexually abused in her grandmother's

home. Jenna had been so moved by Ana's determination to build a new life for herself

that she asked to write a book about her, *Ana's Story*.

In Zambia, Jenna and I glimpsed the widespread consequences of AIDS. Together

we toured the Mututa Memorial Center, founded by Martha Chilufya, whose husband had

died from AIDS. Mututa, whose name means "drumming" in the Bemba language,

provides home-based care for some 150 Zambians living with AIDS. We sat in brilliant

sunshine on the hot red earth, surrounded by baby dolls and bicycles. World Bicycle

Relief had donated 23,000 bicycles to nonprofits in Zambia so that caregivers can ride

through villages and out to the countryside to deliver medicines and check on neighbors.

Some of these men and women on bicycles had gone to their neighbors' houses and found

them in bed, half dead from the ravages of AIDS. They would get them up, get them to a

clinic, and get them started on antiretrovirals for another chance at life. As we sat in a

circle listening to their stories, two girls told us about how they had each been victims of

sexual abuse and were now HIV-positive. Tears streamed down their cheeks as they

spoke. Afterward, Jenna went over, took their hands, and said, "You are not alone. This

story happens all over the world," and she told them about Ana. I added that Jenna had

just written a book about this young woman. They raised their faces to ours and then they

said, "I wish you would tell our stories. Write about us."

Since 2002 I had been following the repressive Burmese junta and its harsh

treatment of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi. Elsie Walker, George's

cousin and my good friend, who had once worked for the Dalai Lama, was a longtime

advocate for Burmese human rights.

The Burmese are a tragic example of a people striving for democracy and being

cruelly denied. The brutality of Burma's current military regime is even more ironic

because the inhabitants of one of the earliest kingdoms there, the Pyu, eschewed war and

jails and even, as legend has it, would not wear silk because they did not want to harm the

silkworms. Like the ancient kingdoms of central Asia, Burma was invaded and conquered

by the Mongols, and it too felt the reach of imperial Britain. The first Anglo-Burmese

War was the longest and most expensive in the history of the British Indian Empire. By

1885 Britain had annexed the entire kingdom and the Burmese king had been forced into

exile in India. The Japanese invaded Burma during World War II, and late in the war, the

Burmese joined with the British to oust Japan from their soil. Burma gained its official

independence in 1948, but it was marked by internal strife. A coup in 1962 placed it

under control of the military. The military maintained power, despite repeated protests,

until a 1990 election, which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won in

a landslide.

The junta placed her under house arrest, nullified the election, and would not

allow the National Assembly to be convened. Although she was eventually allowed to

move about Rangoon, Suu Kyi was returned to house arrest in 2000 and again in 2003.

While I was in the White House, some of what I did to aid the Burmese had to be

done in secret. But by the fall of 2006, I could no longer remain publicly silent. To

coincide with the annual opening of the UN General Assembly in September of 2006, I

convened a roundtable at the UN to address the deteriorating situation in Burma. While

the United Nations uses "Myanmar," the word that the junta has selected to rename the

country, for the meeting I sat under a map inscribed with the traditional name, "Burma."

As in Iraq and other nations, in Burma rape is routinely used as a weapon of war. The day

of the roundtable, we heard stories of the victims. Among the oldest to be raped by

government forces was a woman of eighty; the youngest was a girl of eight.

I followed that conference with op-eds in major newspapers and several meetings

with the UN's special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, and my office participated in

the weekly White House meeting on Burma. In May I joined the Senate Women's

Caucus, comprising all the female senators, and we publicly appealed for Aung San Suu

Kyi's release. In June I met with Burmese exiles and refugees at the White House. By

August, Burma was dominating international headlines because of the government's

brutal crackdown on Buddhist monks who had peacefully taken to the streets to protest

soaring prices for fuel and other basic goods. The government responded with beatings

and arrests. Here and abroad, the usual round of diplomatic protests were launched, but it

was not enough. I decided to speak out.

I telephoned the new UN secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon, and asked him to

denounce the junta's crackdown. I called for a new UN Security Council resolution

against the regime, even though China and Russia had vetoed similar U.S. efforts just

eight months before. Determined to help mobilize public opinion, I sent testimony to the

Senate Foreign Relations Committee, wrote another op-ed for *The Wall Street Journal*,

and gave interviews. The U.S. government imposed new sanctions, including sanctions

aimed at the junta generals' personal wealth. I wanted the people inside Burma to know

that we heard them, and the junta to know it too. Things might not change, but that is no

excuse for not speaking out when the need and the opportunity arise.

On September 20, I hosted a tea at the White House. It was a special tea for what

was called the First Lady's Prayer Group. The group had begun in 1993, as Hillary

Clinton was entering the White House. The idea had come from Susan Baker, Jim

Baker's wife, who was very close to Barbara and George Bush and was dismayed when

they lost their bid for reelection. Susan already belonged to a Christian prayer group that

met each week and included women of all political backgrounds, including Janet Hall,

wife of former Democratic congressman Tony Hall, and Holly Leachman, wife of a

Washington Redskins chaplain who herself was a lay minister at the McLean Bible

Church. Among the other members were Carolyn Wolf, wife of Republican congressman

Frank Wolf, and Joanne Kemp, wife of former congressman Jack Kemp, whose husband

would run for vice president against Bill Clinton and Al Gore in 1996. Grace Nelson,

wife of Democratic Florida senator Bill Nelson, also joined. To assuage her

disappointment over the 1992 race, Susan suggested that her prayer group begin to pray

for the new first lady, and they soon became known as the First Lady's Prayer Group.

Hillary Clinton met with them occasionally. When George and I moved to Washington,

they began to pray for me and each week would send their prayers and Bible passages to

my office for encouragement. Many of these women became my good friends.

They were far from the only ones who prayed for the first lady and the president.

George has long said that the United States is a remarkable nation, maybe the only nation

on earth where so many people pray for their president. We knew that people were

praying for us, and we were raised up by their compassion. We are grateful for those

millions of anonymous prayers.

In the early 1960s, my grandmother found a lump in her breast. She never told

Mother or Daddy or me. She simply found a surgeon, checked herself into the hospital,

and had her breast removed. On our next visit to El Paso, after she was well and healed,

Grammee matter-of-factly mentioned that she had had a breast tumor. The cancer never

spread, and two decades later, when she was eighty-two, Grammee died in her backyard,

watering her flowers, from what must have been a stroke or a heart attack. Papa found her

body amid the flower beds.

My mother is also a breast cancer survivor. Her lump was discovered during a

routine mammogram a few years after Daddy died. She had a mastectomy in Midland

with her own doctor. I was with Mother when she was wheeled into surgery, and we said

a tearful good-bye in case she did not wake up. Afterward, I spent several days at her

house caring for her, but she refused to allow a home health aide to come help her once I

left. She told me, "I don't need any more help."

But I knew all too well the ravages of breast cancer, which had killed my former

Midland next-door neighbor and close friend, Cathie Blackaller. In Dallas I had

volunteered with the Komen Foundation when it was in its infancy. In the United States

we have benefited from years of advocacy for breast cancer treatment and prevention.

There are still, though, many places where cancer remains a highly taboo topic and where

it is difficult to mention the word "breast." One such region of the world was the Middle

East, where many women live their lives shrouded behind abayas.

Health diplomacy is an important way for American women to reach out to other

women around the world, and a key component of that health diplomacy was the U.S.Middle East Partnership for Breast Cancer Awareness and Research, launched in 2006 by

the U.S. government, the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation, and the M. D.

Anderson Cancer Center at the University of Texas. As this partnership took off, I

became an advocate for women's health not just at home but overseas. In October 2007, I

visited some of the countries hardest hit by breast cancer. In many Middle Eastern

nations, breast cancer is the most commonly diagnosed cancer in women, and in some

nations, such as the United Arab Emirates, it is the second leading cause of death.

I arrived after dusk in Abu Dhabi, one of the seven United Arab Emirates, and

was hit by a wall of searing, humid heat when I stepped off the plane. Sheikha Lubna

Khalid Al Qasimi, the UAE's minister for foreign trade, was waiting to greet me. Sheikha

Lubna was educated in California and is a member of the ruling royal family; she is the

first woman to hold a ministerial post. We walked into the enormous and thoroughly

modern gilt and marble dignitaries' airport terminal for the ancient Arab custom of

offering tea to an honored guest. Then my motorcade left, illuminated by the brilliant

reflected light from the skyscrapers that soar above Abu Dhabi.

The next morning I awoke to the hum of giant cranes and the skeletons of massive

buildings rising from what had less than a century ago been a desert home to nomadic

fishermen and herders. In 2007 *Fortune* magazine had declared it the richest city in the

world. Yet its vast riches had done little to protect women from disease. In Abu Dhabi,

breast cancer is the leading cause of death for women; only 36 percent of all women find

their cancers when they are most treatable, in stage one or two. Many women do not want

to be examined by a physician because they fear social ostracism if they are found to

have breast cancer. Their husbands may leave them; their sons may turn their backs.

Their daughters may be considered unmarriageable.

Away from the glint of the city's modern towers, I gathered with breast cancer

survivors inside a large circular tent whose walls were draped in billowy pink fabric. The

emirates were a largely Bedouin society before the discovery of oil, and this tent, which

had been erected within the walls of a hospital, spoke to those ancient traditions. The

women who came to this Pink Majlis, literally, in Arabic, "the pink place of sitting," were

veiled and covered. A few had sewn pink ribbons on the black cloth of their abayas. In a

voice barely above a whisper, one survivor told me of having been abandoned by her

husband. Another spoke proudly of how, when her hair fell out from chemotherapy, her

husband and her two sons shaved their heads in solidarity. I listened to these women and

heard in their voices the common fear of all women, the fear of a disease that causes

sickness, disfigurement, and death.

Before I left Abu Dhabi, I visited the seaside palace of Sheikha Fatima, the widow

of the late ruler of the emirates. Her home was decorated in marble and gold, and every

table fairly groaned with enormous platters of food, overflowing bowls of fruits, and

trays of dates and nuts. Abundance is the sign of hospitality. Sheikha Lubna joined us,

along with many of Sheikha Fatima's female relatives, and it was a striking confluence of

the changes in women's lives, behind the veil, in just a few generations. While the young,

veiled women talked about participating in Abu Dhabi's business and political life,

Sheikha Fatima remained firmly rooted in traditional ways. She not only covered herself

but she wore a leather face mask. Her husband, she told me, thought it was very

provocative to see only the tiniest bit of her eyes.

The neighboring emirate city of Dubai is even hotter; it is the largest of the

emirate states. Dubai had already begun a major initiative through the Chamber of

Commerce and local businesses, including American-owned firms like FedEx, to create

an education program about breast cancer. I marveled at the massive buildings, the manmade islands, and the second largest man-made marina in the world. The entire city, a

modern wonder where towers twist and point to the sky, has been fashioned on top of a

sandy outcropping.

The third Middle Eastern partnership was located in Saudi Arabia. In the newly

opened King Fahd Medical Center, I spoke to reporters as a female doctor watched me

from behind a dividing wall, her entire body covered except for a thin opening for her

eyeglasses.

In the Saudi Kingdom, women contract breast cancer at far younger ages than in

the United States, often a decade earlier. Over coffee in the city of Jeddah with breast

cancer patients to "break the silence," I looked around and realized that every woman in

the room was young, many two decades younger than I. Many were mothers with small

children. One of the country's most outspoken cancer patients, and one of the first Saudi

women to speak openly about her disease, is an obstetrician and gynecologist, Dr. Samia

al-Amoudi. In 2007 she was forty-nine years old.

As we talked, a cancer survivor asked me what I thought of Saudi women. I told

her the truth, that at first I had found it disconcerting to sit with women who were

covered, that the covers seemed like barriers between us, closing them off from me, and

that I had expected it would be difficult to talk to them, but I was wrong. It was

surprisingly easy to talk about such an intimate subject as breast cancer. A woman held

up a bit of her black abaya and said, "These covers may be black, but they're transparent,"

meaning that underneath we are all very much the same.

As our visit ended, two women gave me a black head scarf decorated with pink

ribbons. Most of the women in the room were wearing them. As a sign of respect to them

and to their disease, for a minute I placed the scarf over my head. The hastily snapped

photo capturing the moment spawned a small uproar: by wearing the symbol of Saudi

cancer survivors, I was thought to be endorsing veiling across the globe, as opposed to

sitting with mothers and their daughters who were looking for hope when facing a disease

that is, far too often, a death sentence.

From Saudi Arabia, I went on to Kuwait, where I met with a group of about

twenty women leaders, including a lawyer, the first female government minister, and an

assistant government undersecretary for tourism. I asked to meet with female leaders in

nearly all of the countries I visited, but this meeting was special. Just a year before, in

2006, Kuwaiti women had won the right to vote. In pleading their case, the women's

activist Roula al-Dashti had said, "Half a democracy is not a democracy." Twenty-seven

women ran for office in the 2006 national elections, and while up to 58 percent of

Kuwait's women voted for the first time, every female candidate lost.

Three of the women I met with had been among the candidates. We gathered in

the home of a female Kuwaiti politician and member of the ruling family, Rasha AlSabah. We sat on thick, cushioned sofas around the edges of the room, and it was clear

when they spoke that the women were deeply disappointed and hurt that other women

had not turned out to elect them. Gently, I asked the women, What did you run on? What

was your platform? And they looked surprised. It apparently had not occurred to them to

run on issues, something we take for granted in our political campaigns. They had run

simply on the fact that they were women. We forget when we look at other nations trying

to democratize how much there is to be learned. I am reminded of the story of China

when it began expanding its relations with the West at the close of the nineteenth century.

Vast numbers of traders, emissaries, missionaries, and other visitors saw Chinese women

hobbling on bound feet. Shamed, China began to abandon the practice; it was formally

banned in 1912. Yet even now, there are old women whose feet are wrapped in rags.

I mentioned to the Kuwaiti women that George in his campaigns, starting with the

one to become governor of Texas, had run on specific issues that were important to him.

His goal was to explain what he would do if he were elected and how his plans differed

from those of his opponent. In May of 2009, sixteen women ran for public office in

Kuwait, and this time four of them were elected to the country's assembly.

After meeting with the Kuwaiti women, I had a chance to meet and thank some of

our troops who were stationed in Kuwait, helping to support U.S. forces in Iraq.

I paid a call as well on the emir of Kuwait, and we sat in two very fancy chairs

surrounded by members of his government and my staff, attempting to make small talk.

When our supply of topics dwindled, I began to look for a way to gracefully excuse

myself. Just then he stood up, and a door opened onto a beautiful and elegant tea party.

Drinking from a dainty china cup and nibbling on delicacies, I walked about and spoke

with the Kuwaitis in one of the most gracious parties I ever attended.

On this trip I returned to Amman, Jordan, where I announced a U.S.-Jordanian

partnership at the King Hussein Cancer Center, named for King Abdullah's father, the

late King Hussein, who had battled cancer for years. Indeed, with cancer, we do not know

from where a breakthrough treatment will come or when. Perhaps it will be a doctor in

Amman, or a study of Bedouin women in Abu Dhabi that helps us unlock some of the

mystery of this disease.

On my previous visit, everyone in Jordan had told me to go to the ancient city of

Petra. Before my plane took off for home, this time I did, walking through its intricate

buildings carved deep in the sandstone, rather like the ancient Buddhas in Bamiyan,

Afghanistan. Along one street I spotted a group of camels and their handlers, and I turned

to our ambassador, David Hale; my chief of staff, Anita McBride; and my press

secretary, Sally McDonough, and said, "Let's ride." On our camels, we meandered

through the twisting, narrow gorge that surrounds the ancient city and its rose-colored

walls. Much of the city has lain largely silent since the 300s, when an earthquake struck,

but it is still possible to imagine the people who once made their homes amid this

cavernous stone. As we rounded one final bend, almost like a hallway cut through the

earth, we came upon a group of Americans. When they caught sight of me, they

spontaneously raised their fingers to make the sign of "hook 'em horns" and began

singing "The Eyes of Texas." It was a tour group from home.

The November 6 visit of Nicolas Sarkozy, the new president of France, to

Washington was surrounded by high-level intrigue: would he or would he not be bringing

his wife? In August the Sarkozy family had chosen to vacation on a New Hampshire lake.

Cecilia Sarkozy, France's first lady, had mentioned this to me during the G8 Summit. I

knew George and I would be in Maine visiting his parents, and I suggested that the

Sarkozys and their son come to Kennebunkport. We planned a kid-friendly meal of

hamburgers, hot dogs, and blueberry pie, but Cecilia stayed behind and Sarkozy came

alone. Now, before we printed the invitations for the state dinner, the National Security

Council was working with the French government to determine whether this visit would

also be a solo one.

George and I like Nicolas Sarkozy very much. He is young and dynamic and

blunt, and he has a great sense of humor and understanding of the frequent absurdity of

political life. Sarkozy's father was a Hungarian immigrant, a refugee from World War II

and the Communists. Over lunch Sarkozy told us that when he was young, his father said

to him, "You must move to the United States." When Nicolas looked at him quizzically,

his father had added, "I know that you want to be president, but a man named Sarkozy

will never be president of France."

Sarkozy did come by himself. Shortly afterward, he and Cecilia divorced, and a

few months later, he married the model and singer Carla Bruni. Single or married, the

French president arrived in Washington with a very interesting entourage. Rather than the

typical group of political people, his delegation included a chef, Guy Savoy, from one of

Paris's top restaurants and the director of the Louvre Museum, Henri Loyrette, as well as

a retinue of cabinet ministers.

In contrast to the sometimes testy relationship that George had with Jacques

Chirac, Sarkozy was pro-American and interested in building a strong partnership with

the United States. It was no accident that he timed his visit to coincide with the 250th

anniversary of the birth of the Marquis de Lafayette, the young Frenchman who had

become one of George Washington's closest aides during the Revolutionary War and who

is buried in France beneath soil that he himself carried home from the ground around

Bunker Hill. In January, at the request of Jim Billington, the Librarian of Congress, I had

paid a visit to the Marquis de Lafayette's La Grange, a fifteenth-century chateau outside

of Paris, where he lived after his brutal imprisonment during the French Revolution. The

chateau's attic contained a treasure trove of artifacts and personal Lafayette papers, and

the Library of Congress had overseen a special effort to digitize the collection. So

entwined was Lafayette's life with the young United States that on the grounds of La

Grange are trees from every U.S. state he visited; he brought their saplings home and

planted them. He kept a rare letter written by Martha Washington, American newspapers

from 1776, a signed copy of the Declaration of Independence, and an American flag that

he took with him to prison. Across the ocean President George Washington labored for

Lafayette's release, sent his dear friend books, and gave Lafayette's son refuge in the

young America.

I thought that to commemorate this extraordinary French aristocrat who had such

love for the United States, we should host Nicolas Sarkozy at Washington's Mount

Vernon home. My initial hope was to do a formal state dinner on the grounds, but the

visit could not be scheduled until November, and by then the weather was likely to be

changeable and cold. Instead, on Sarkozy's second day in Washington, D.C., the two

heads of state traveled to Mount Vernon and sat at the table where Lafayette and

Washington had once dined to discuss the security of the globe. But unlike that George

and the marquis, George and Nicolas were banished to Mount Vernon's greenhouse for

lunch. The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association, which oversees the historic treasure, does

not permit food or drink of any kind inside Washington's home, not even for two

presidents.

Before he left, Sarkozy also addressed a joint session of Congress--the Marquis de

Lafayette had been the first foreign dignitary to do that, in 1824--and told the House and

Senate that he was committed to sending more French forces to help secure Afghanistan.

By late fall the Iraq surge had reached its maximum point, with 170,000 U.S.

troops on the ground, and there were positive signs of change. In the summer Iraq had

met eight of eighteen political and security benchmarks, but on another eight, its progress

was still, according to a White House review, "unsatisfactory." There had, however, been

no catastrophic bomb attacks. Violence was markedly declining, as were attacks on U.S.

troops and U.S. combat deaths. In mid-December, British troops would return control of

the once violent port city of Basra to the Iraqis and the Iraqi army. It appeared that the

surge, which earlier that year had been so derided by its critics, was beginning to bear

fruit.

December brought another round of Christmas parties. Our pastry team

commandeered the ground-floor China and Vermeil rooms to frost the thousands of

Barney and Miss Beazley cookies they baked each season. The theme I had chosen was

"Holiday in the National Parks." I had come to love the national parks from all my

summer hiking trips. With my childhood friends, I had hiked not just in Yosemite and

Yellowstone but also in Olympic, Glacier, Denali, Mesa Verde, Acadia, the Everglades,

Zion, and Death Valley, all truly some of the most beautiful and striking spots on earth.

In 2005 my hiking group and I had returned to the Grand Canyon, where we

began our hiking ritual in 1986, the year we turned forty. This time we took our daughters

on the route that started with a river trip through the canyon and then a ten-mile hike out

along the South Rim. There were five women in their late fifties and six in their twenties.

The twenty-somethings walked out in about four hours; their mothers finally made it in

seven. The dry heat and the hike had so exhausted me that at one point I thought about

lying down to rest alongside the trail. Then I imagined the headlines: "First Lady Carried

from Canyon on a Gurney," and I doggedly kept going. When the girls asked us if they

could come again next year, we looked at each other for an instant, sweat beading on our

faces, and answered with a resounding "No."

During our summer hikes, we always invited the park superintendent and rangers

to join us, usually on our last night. After our 2002 visit to Yellowstone, Suzanne Lewis,

the superintendent, surprised us by nominating my childhood friend Regan Gammon to

the National Park Foundation board. Started in 1967 with support from Lady Bird

Johnson and funds from Laurance Rockefeller, the foundation serves as a charitable

partner for the park system, helping to increase parkland, protect fragile ecosystems and

species, conduct school outreach, and protect park history. Although we had hiked in the

parks for years, none of us had been aware of the foundation and its work. After Regan, I

joined as well, as the foundation's honorary chair.

To decorate the White House for "Holiday in the National Parks," the official title

of the holiday celebration, we sent a plain gold ball to each of the 391 parks and historic

sites and asked park service officials to select a local artisan to create an ornament that

would represent the site. When we think of national parks, we tend to think of the Grand

Canyon, Yellowstone, and Yosemite, but the list is long and includes the White House

grounds, Independence Hall, the Statue of Liberty, Gettysburg, and Valley Forge. Every

state in the nation has a national park or monument except Delaware, which is creating a

national historic trail.

For the fir tree in the Blue Room, we received ornaments painted or etched with

scenes from the Shiloh battlefield and from the Pennsylvania site where Flight 93 had

crashed, which was now our newest national monument. In the niches at the entry to the

State Floor, we hung oil paintings by Adrian Martinez of Hopi Point at the Grand Canyon

and a waterfall in Zion National Park to bring scenes of the parklands into the White

House. He created the paintings especially for the curved spaces, working on scaffolds as

well as down on his knees. White House carpenters built replicas of the missions in San

Antonio, the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, and the Statue of Liberty to decorate the rooms

and halls. The chefs reproduced Mount Rushmore in chocolate. In the Palm Room, the

decorative tree was made entirely from seashells to represent our national seashores. It

was a wonderful chance to showcase our diverse parklands, and our holiday card depicted

a scene from the first lady's garden--itself national parkland--painted by David

Drummond. We added our wishes that "the joy of all creation fill your heart this blessed

season."

At our Hanukkah party, Judea and Ruth Pearl, the parents of Danny Pearl, *The*

Wall Street Journal reporter kidnapped and murdered by terrorists in Pakistan, lit the

menorah. For the six previous years, we had borrowed magnificent menorahs from

Jewish museums and synagogues around the nation. Many had been saved from Europe

before the Holocaust. But this year the Pearls brought their family menorah.

The Pearl family menorah had belonged to Danny's great-grandfather Chaim, who

had carried it with him when he moved from Poland to Israel to help found the town of

Bnei-Brak, where today there is a street named in Chaim Pearl's honor. From there the

menorah had come to the United States. Year after year it was lovingly lit in the Pearls'

home. Judea, who is also a cantor, movingly sang to us during the ceremony and his

melodic voice left many guests wiping their eyes. When George spoke, he said that

Daniel Pearl's "only crime was being a Jewish American--something Daniel would never

deny. In his final moments, Daniel told his captors about a street in Israel named for his

great-grandfather. He looked into their cameras and said, 'My father is Jewish, my mother

is Jewish, and I am Jewish.' These words have become a source of inspiration for

Americans of all faiths. They show the courage of a man who refused to bow before

terror--and the strength of a spirit that could not be broken."

On December 10, International Human Rights Day, I spoke via teleconference to

Burmese refugees living in Thailand and then issued a call for greater international

pressure on the junta, which was still persecuting those who had peacefully protested in

the late summer. In Iraq the violence was continuing to ebb. The surge was showing

further signs of working.

For us, the year 2008 was to be a year of lasts, the last NATO Summit, last

Summit of the Americas, last international trips and visits, the last state dinner, the last

chance for me to work on the White House initiatives I had begun. The final year in

office, especially after seven years, is in many ways its own long good-bye. But there

were firsts as well, and though the year was sometimes difficult, it was also remarkable.

I could now walk the halls of the White House and have my own memories come

flooding back, such as the 2006 Veterans Day, when we invited all the living members of

my father's World War II unit, the Timberwolves. Those who could came to the White

House with their wives and children. Some apologized that they didn't have a jacket or a

tie to wear, and we said, Come just as you are. One veteran didn't believe that he was

actually being invited to the White House--he thought it was a scam and called the Better

Business Bureau. After a chain of phone calls up to his congressman, he was assured that

the invitation was in fact real. I watched those men, who had once been so young and

brave, come with their canes, walkers, and wheelchairs to the house of presidents and

wished my father could have been among them.

In June 2008, we invited the Classes of 1964 from all three Midland high schools-Midland, Lee, and George Washington Carver--for a reunion at the White House. In the

fall we held a dinner for the justices on the Supreme Court and their spouses.

And now, in addition to our American guests, I could recall the many times when

I had walked women from Africa and Afghanistan through these famous rooms and halls,

so they might glimpse our history as well. In the East Room, George had paid tribute to

Medal of Honor recipients, his voice breaking as he recited their acts of heroism until he

himself could barely speak. I could pass each doorway and remember a conversation I

had had, a person I had met, a memory that was my own.

We had hosted dinners in the State Dining Room in honor of Benjamin Franklin

and William Shakespeare as well as two black-tie dinners to recognize Eunice Kennedy

Shriver and the Special Olympics, which she helped to found. We had celebrated the

Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, Thomas Jefferson's

265th birthday, and also baseball. For my entire eight years, I had wonderful partnerships

with our leading national cultural arts agencies. The poet Dana Gioia, who headed the

National Endowment for the Arts, helped Americans rediscover the pleasure of reading

through his Big Read program, highlighting such classics as *To Kill a Mockingbird,*

Fahrenheit 451, and *The Joy Luck Club.* I was there when Dana and the NEA launched

the largest tour of Shakespeare in American history, bringing the Bard's words to some

2,300 small and midsize communities in all fifty states, as well as to 3,600 schools and

major military bases. Dana pioneered a special NEA effort called Operation

Homecoming, which paired returning war veterans with writers to help them tell their

stories. A special anthology of soldiers' writings was published in 2006.

I was happy to support Chairman Bruce Cole's efforts at the National Endowment

for the Humanities to reinvigorate the teaching of history through programs such as We

the People, which put some of our most important national documents within reach of

school classrooms. I helped launch Picturing America, which gave public and private

schools, libraries, and communities access to top-quality reproductions of iconic images

of America's past, so they might experience our history through art, from *Washington*

Crossing the Delaware to the works of Winslow Homer, Depression-era photographs by

Dorothea Lange, and the scene of Martin Luther King marching from Selma to

Montgomery.

At the Institute of Museums and Library Services, Dr. Robert Martin, and later

Anne-Imelda Radice, worked with the nation's 122,000 libraries and 17,500 museums to

recruit and educate new professionals. I was proud to be part of IMLS's presentations of

the annual National Medals for Museum and Library Service. Among its many

contributions, IMLS helped to provide opportunities to train Native Americans to

preserve their past in Arizona, and support interpreters for African-American history in

Brooklyn. It worked with the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo to assist with the conservation

of endangered animals, and also to assist with the 190 million objects around the nation

that are in serious need of conservation.

At the White House we hosted each year's winners of the Cooper Hewitt National

Design Awards, given to the best architects, landscape architects, fashion designers, and

others whose design work make our country more beautiful. I enjoyed meeting many of

these talented creators, whose work I had admired for years. At the President's

Committee on the Arts and Humanities, my good friend Adair Margo expanded the

Coming Up Taller Awards for excellence in children's arts programs to add an

international focus, by recognizing programs in Mexico, Egypt, and China. The idea is

that when a child takes a bow, afterward he or she comes up taller. I am proud to have

helped make the White House a strong partner for the nation's artistic and cultural life.

Many of our happiest moments came from welcoming Americans from across the

nation into the home of presidents. We had military families, from Jewish veterans of the

Korean War to the cousins and friends of soldiers in Iraq. Fifteen hundred military

spouses came for breakfast. We invited people we'd met out along rope lines or who had

written us letters. We hosted Girl Scout troops and school groups. I invited high school

students from Washington's Ballou High, which was grieving several murders, to come to

the East Room for a special screening of a documentary on their high school band. We

invited a dance troupe from Atlanta, comprised of girls from at-risk neighborhoods, to

perform for the Coming Up Taller Awards. When travel funds were an issue for this

troupe and others, we found the money to pay their way to the White House. We had over

a thousand college athletes come for NCAA receptions. Almost every week, Diane

Bodman, wife of Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman, brought through small groups of

wounded soldiers, veterans, and their families. I wanted everyone who walked through

the doors or onto the grounds to feel comfortable. During the late-spring and summer

months, George and I watched children play T-ball, as a thousand visitors strolled around

the South Lawn during each game. We were happy that the White House grounds had

become a place where families could gather on a Sunday afternoon. Opening this house,

opening our days to others, also opened our own hearts.

In February, George and I made our last trip to Africa. We began in the West

African nation of Benin and then flew to Tanzania, where at the airport crowds of dancers

awaited us dressed in fabric imprinted with George's picture, surrounded by the country's

traditional colors of blue, green, black, and yellow. Tanzania's first lady wore a dress

made from fabric with George's picture stamped on it and the American and Tanzanian

flags intertwined. On one of her scarves was written the words "We cherish democracy."

Everywhere we stopped, in Benin and Tanzania and Rwanda and Ghana and

Liberia, thousands of people lined the sides of the roads, waving American flags and the

flags of their nations, singing and cheering, to thank George for what he had done for

them, for the lives that his efforts had saved. The Ghanaian president, John Kufuor,

invited a thousand people to celebrate at a dinner in an overflowing ballroom, where the

band played Ghanaian highlife music, a combination of Glenn Miller-style swing and

jazz. President Kufuor asked me to dance, and within minutes everyone was on his or her

feet, even George, dancing with Theresa Kufuor.

There had been an incredible change from our first trip, in 2003. I remember one

mother in Botswana who had heard that the American president was coming to visit a

local medical clinic, so she dressed her daughter in a lovely white, fluffy dress with bits

of lavender, already looking like an angel. The little girl lay on an examining table, so

frail and sick but with her mother's last hopes to make her beautiful. Today, with

antiretrovirals, that child would have a chance. Millions do have a chance. Whereas once

a visit to Africa was about holding the hands of the sick and dying, now it is about hope.

People who were waiting quietly for death are taking antiretrovirals and, in what they call

the "Lazarus effect," are now celebrating a second chance at life.

Our history has made us a free nation, but history has not been so kind to much of

Africa, where colonialism, the slave trade, poverty, war, and pandemic disease have

ravaged nations not just for decades but for centuries. Yet after just three years, nearly 25

million people in sub-Saharan Africa, living in the fifteen countries of the President's

Malaria Initiative, were protected by insecticide-treated nets. In 2003, only fifty thousand

people in sub-Saharan Africa received antiretroviral treatment for AIDS. By 2008, after

George's PEPFAR program, that number had grown to more than 2 million. Another 4

million orphans and vulnerable children had been cared for, and more than 200,000

babies whose mothers had AIDS were born HIV-free. People thanked us with such

enthusiasm and warmth that we left each stop with tears in our eyes.

In March I traveled to Haiti, one of the first nations to receive PEPFAR funding.

It is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, with the greatest HIV burden. In the

early 1980s, Haiti was the epicenter for HIV. It was the first country on earth to have a

clinic devoted solely to HIV/AIDS care, the GHESKIO Center in Port-au-Prince,

founded in 1982 by Dr. Jean Pape, a native Haitian who trained as a doctor at New York's

Weill Cornell Medical College, one of the center's longest sponsors. Each year the clinic

sees over 100,000 people, many of them the poorest of the poor. Even in March, the

island heat was stifling, and the brightly colored buildings belied years of suffering. For

most of the decade, Haiti's political situation had been so volatile that the Secret Service

had refused to allow me to visit earlier in George's term. But in the Haitians I met, I saw a

deep warmth, rich spirit, and hope for the future. And there were reasons to hope. By

2008, Haiti's infection rate from HIV had fallen, and PEPFAR programs were helping to

provide antiretrovirals to nearly eighteen thousand men, women, and children. We left

hoping that more things would change, never imagining the devastating earthquake to

come.

In April, Benedict XVI made the first visit by a Pope to the White House in

almost thirty years. He came on April 16, his birthday, and more than thirteen thousand

guests welcomed him on the South Lawn, spontaneously serenading the Pontiff with

"Happy Birthday" during the arrival ceremony. It was the largest gathering on record at

the White House.

The papal nuncio told the White House that the Pope had decided to arrive on his

birthday because "you spend your birthday with your friends." He wanted the visit to be a

reflection of his respect for the United States, for its generosity and charity. We were

deeply touched.

We decorated with yellow and white tulips, in honor of the papal colors, and

under a sky of brilliant blue, the soloist Kathleen Battle performed "The Lord's Prayer,"

rather than a traditional anthem or marching song. We had asked if there was any song

the Pope would like to hear, and the papal nuncio said the song with the words "Glory!

Glory! Hallelujah." So Sergeant Alvy Powell led the Army Chorus in singing the Civil

War anthem "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." Then George spoke. "Here in America,

you'll find a nation of compassion. . . . Each day citizens across America answer the

universal call to feed the hungry and comfort the sick and care for the infirm. Each day

across the world the United States is working to eradicate disease, alleviate poverty,

promote peace and bring the light of hope to places still mired in the darkness of tyranny

and despair. . . . In a world where some invoke the name of God to justify acts of terror

and murder and hate, we need your message that 'God is love.'"

Pope Benedict talked of America's pluralistic society and how "all believers have

found here the freedom to worship God in accordance to the dictates of their conscience."

He continued, "Freedom is not only a gift, but also a summons to personal responsibility.

Americans know this from experience--almost every town in this country had its

monuments honoring those who sacrificed their lives in defense of freedom, both at home

and abroad."

He ended with the words "God bless America."

When the arrival ceremony was complete, we walked inside the White House and

up to the State Floor. I'd asked the pastry chef to prepare a birthday cake for the Pope.

When we wheeled out the four-tier cream and white cake, adorned with white icing

ribbons and a single white candle, his eyes lit up with surprise.

The visit was deeply meaningful for George and for me, and also for the many

members of our family who are Catholic, including Jeb and his wife, Columba, and

Doro's husband, Bobby Koch, and their children.

That night Pope Benedict had a private dinner with his American cardinals while

we held a special dinner in honor of his visit, inviting Catholic bishops and other Catholic

leaders, especially from charities, who had done so much to help at home and abroad. We

had Catholic members of the cabinet and the Congress, including Nancy Pelosi, and

Catholic members of the Supreme Court, as well as many of our good friends who shared

the Pope's faith, including Joey and Jan O'Neill, who had introduced George and me, now

more than thirty years ago. That April 16 was one of the loveliest days we spent at the

White House.

Just over two weeks later, on May 2, Cyclone Nargis devastated the Burmese

coast, causing the worst natural disaster in Burma's recorded history. More than 100,000

were reported dead, and many, many more were missing. And that was just the official

count; unofficial totals suggested that the number of deaths might be far higher,

approaching the toll of the deadly 2004 tsunami. To add to the suffering, the Burmese

government would not allow outside aid. The United States had naval vessels that could

have docked and provided clean water and medical care for those in need, as we had done

after the tsunami, but the ruling junta would rather inflict more loss of life than give up an

inch of power. So at three in the afternoon on May 5, I walked into the White House

briefing room to speak to the press, and via them to the world, about Burma, including

the fact that the only warnings about the cyclone the Burmese people had received had

come from the United States, from our Radio Free Asia and Voice of America. I hoped

that Burma would accept aid from India at least. In my remarks, I called on the junta to

postpone a scheduled May 10 vote on a new sham constitution, written largely to bar

Aung San Suu Kyi from running for office. The constitution banned anyone who had

ever been married to a foreigner from holding office--as it happens, her late husband was

British.

The vote was postponed, and as the days passed, the junta did relent and allow

one hundred American C-130s flights fully loaded with emergency medical supplies to

land in Rangoon. But the devastation outside the capital was far worse, and the junta

would not permit our ships to dock and offer immediate, lifesaving aid. To maintain their

brutal control, Burma's rulers preferred death and disease to life.

On May 10, Jenna married Henry Hager at our ranch, overlooking our tiny lake,

the old cattle watering hole, where we now stocked fish and grew prairie grasses. Henry

was waiting for her as the sun set. Barbara was her maid of honor, and Jenna's tearful dad

walked her down the aisle as mariachis played "Here Comes the Bride." Our longtime

friend the Houston pastor Kirbyjon Caldwell performed the service. Jenna and Henry

were wed before an altar and cross carved from the same limestone that forms the walls

of our house. It was the sturdiest of foundations for their new life together.

Mother was there, and Bar and Gampy read to Jenna and Henry from First

Corinthians. Jenna's cousin Wendy and her husband, Diego Reyes, read a Pablo Neruda

poem in English and in Spanish. And Henry's parents, John and Maggie Hager, spoke of

what they had learned about how to keep a marriage strong, of how they had faced and

triumphed over adversity when John Hager contracted polio shortly after Henry's older

brother was born.

That evening, as Jenna and Henry slipped on their shiny new rings, George and I

basked in their love. Come fall, we would mark our thirty-first year of marriage. Our

daughter was a newlywed, and we had now been together for exactly half our lifetimes.

We held their celebratory dinner in a large tent decorated with giant festival staffs,

trailing flowers, and streams of brightly colored ribbons. After tearful toasts the guests

danced to the music of Super T and then, late in the evening, gathered around the warm

glow of a firepit. A few weeks later, we hosted a reception for Jenna and Henry in the

White House.

Jenna had dreamed of marrying at the ranch since we first bought the land, and

she and Henry very much wanted to marry at a place they could return to. Each spring,

when the bluebonnets open and the pink evening primrose blooms, carpeting the ground

as they did on that perfect early evening, I am reminded of how Henry and Jenna took

their first steps together as husband and wife, beaming smiles on their faces, walking

beneath a shower of fragrant rose petals.

As Jenna and Henry left on their honeymoon, George and I made our final

presidential visit to the Middle East. We arrived to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of

the founding of the State of Israel. After joining in the official commemorations, George

and I walked the heights of the ancient desert fortress of Masada, atop a massive,

weathered outcropping of rock where 960 defenders held out for three years against the

Roman Tenth Legion's attempt to conquer them all. Today Israeli soldiers make the

promise that "Masada shall never fall again." On May 15, the anniversary of Israel's birth,

George addressed its parliament, the Knesset. "The alliance between our governments,"

he said, "is unbreakable, yet the source of our friendship runs deeper than any treaty. It is

grounded in the shared spirit of our people, the bonds of the Book, the ties of the soul.

When William Bradford stepped off the *Mayflower* in 1620, he quoted the words of

Jeremiah: 'Come let us declare Zion in the word of God.' The founders of my country saw

a new promised land and bestowed upon their towns names like Bethlehem and New

Canaan. And in time, many Americans became passionate advocates for a Jewish state."

George recalled how he too, on previous visits, had prayed at Yad Vashem and touched

the Western Wall.

We paid a call on some of our Arab friends as well, first King Abdullah of Saudi

Arabia. There I returned to visit with breast cancer patients at King Fahd Medical Center.

The same female doctor, covered entirely except for the slit for her eyes, approached me

and then was surprised when I did not immediately recognize her through her veils. I was

delighted to learn that, though its partnership with the United States was less than two

years old, the King Fahd Center had already scheduled a breast cancer conference for

October, to include oncologists and cancer specialists from around the Middle East.

In Egypt I visited the coral reefs around the Red Sea port of Sharm al-Sheikh and

from a glass-bottomed boat watched as sea life moved in silence among the brilliantcolored coral. On land I launched an international Big Read program between American

and Egyptian high school students. The Egyptians read *To Kill a Mockingbird, The*

Grapes of Wrath, and *Fahrenheit 451,* while the American students read *The Thief and*

the Dogs, a novel by the Nobel Prize-winning writer Naguib Mahfouz.

Come June, I made my third and final visit to Afghanistan.

I began in Bamiyan Province, where those ancient Buddhas had been destroyed

seven years earlier. From almost any spot in the valley I could gaze up and see the empty

niches, hollowed deep into the stone. Today Bamiyan has a female governor and is one of

the safest provinces in the nation. In my 2005 visit, when I met her in Kabul, I had

promised Dr. Habiba Sarabi that I would come to her home. When my helicopter landed,

Governor Sarabi was waiting on the dusty ground. We embraced, and I said, "I told you I

would come."

On full display was a group of Kiwi troops, who were there as part of the New

Zealand army and New Zealand's provincial reconstruction team. In tan desert

camouflage, they did a full native Powhiri dance; a few men had donned body paint and

waved long, pointed spears as the Secret Service watched warily.

A short way from the landing strip, where the helicopters remained parked and

ready and surrounded by armed guards, Governor Sarabi and I entered a police training

facility. In spare prefab buildings, Afghans were learning the basics of law enforcement,

and in one room, with dark curtains on its high, tiny rectangular windows, the trainees

were women. Eleven Afghan women had come here to study basic police work. Seated at

their rows of desks, their slightly bent heads veiled and bodies fully covered, they asked

that no photographs be taken of their faces. At that moment, I felt the depths of their

bravery; they were concealing their identities not merely from local insurgents or opium

poppy merchants. Many of these women's own families did not know that they were

training to be police officers.

From the academy, Governor Sarabi and I traveled farther into the valley, past

scrubby fields. There, in the shadow of the ancient Buddha's remains, mud-brick walls

were rising. It was the first floor of what would become a new, two-story school for

Afghan boys and girls. The school was being constructed by the Ayenda Foundation, an

offshoot of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council. Ayenda was founded in 2006 by two

council members, Shamim Jawad, the wife of the Afghan ambassador to the United

States, and Timothy McBride, who had worked for Gampy as an assistant to the president

in the White House. The money to build the school had been donated entirely by

American and Afghan citizens.

Before I left Bamiyan, I cut the ribbon for a new highway built by the U.S.

Agency for International Development. The new road followed one of the ancient Silk

Road pathways, but today it led not over the mountains but to the airport, so local

entrepreneurs might sell and ship their goods to Kabul and beyond. Then the helicopters

lifted off for Kabul and the Presidential Palace, where President Karzai was waiting. We

met and spoke to the press. In other rooms of the palace I visited with students, young

men and women from Kabul University, as well as from the new American University of

Afghanistan and the International School of Kabul, whose formation I had announced

only three years before. For these students it was their first time on the Presidential

Palace grounds. But I had to remain inside the palace compound; I could not walk the

streets of Kabul, past store windows and open front shops, and my plane had to be in the

air by dusk.

Vast swaths of Afghanistan still had no electricity or running water. But the lack

of knowledge was the worst of all. Bamiyan, for example, has for years been a rich

potato-growing region. But local farmers now had no storage facilities for their crops.

They could not preserve their harvest to eat during the harsh winters, nor could they keep

their surplus to sell when prices were high. Instead, they hawked their freshly dug crops

in local markets, and whatever they did not sell rotted. Then an Idaho potato farmer

recalled how his own grandparents had stored their potatoes, in a simple dugout cellar.

He taught Afghan farmers to do the same. There are hundreds of stories like this, of

soldiers who came back after they left the army, of retired police officers who came over

as police trainers. Colonel Gary Davis, who served as surgeon general for the U.S. Army

in Afghanistan, returned to Kabul after he retired from the military to teach Afghan

doctors and nurses how to care for some of the country's most serious pregnancy-related

complications. Despite the obstacles and the dangers, these Americans have given so

much of themselves to make other lives better and have asked nothing in return.

And the obstacles are many. In January of 2008, a group of female Afghan

parliamentarians came to see me at the White House. They spoke of the severe threats

that women continue to live under in all parts of Afghanistan and of how much they

feared the Taliban's return. One of them told me, "This is our only chance."

But I remember too one of my friends who said, "We talk so much about helping

Afghan women. What about the men? It seems to me they are the ones who need to

change most of all."

Slowly, some are changing. There are illiterate men who are happy to have their

daughters enrolled in school and learning to read. Days after my Afghan visit ended, I

spoke at an international donor conference in Paris hosted by President Nicolas Sarkozy.

He had convened eighty nations and organizations to secure more global aid for

Afghanistan. Already over 6 million Afghan children were attending school; 1.5 million

of them were girls, who had been banned from the classroom before 2002.

I made my case and hoped that this "only chance" would be enough.

After Paris, George and I traveled together to Slovenia, to attend our last U.S.European Union Summit. As I left Europe, I thought of the many friendships we had

made with foreign leaders. I would miss German chancellor Angela Merkel and her

husband, Joachim Sauer, whose quick minds and lively conversation warmed our visits.

We had stayed with them in the German version of Camp David, an old manor house

located in the former East Germany that had been fully restored. In return, we had invited

them to visit our ranch, where we hiked and talked. I had built a friendship with Aliza

Olmert, wife of the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Olmert, who was herself an

accomplished artist. And I had taken great joy in my visits with the king and queen of

Jordan. But it was also time for us to move on. Tony and Cherie Blair had already left 10

Downing Street. Soon we would be leaving the White House.

But first I wanted to see the Burmese border lands.

From the air, on August 7, everything below me was green, that rich, overgrown

green of Southeast Asian jungles and the wide plumes of stunted mangrove and towering

native oak trees. As the small American military cargo plane descended, I could see the

roadways cutting through and catch a quick glimpse of the narrow city streets of Mae Sot,

punctuated by the brilliant gold-leaf dome of the temple pagoda. I was in northern

Thailand, and just beyond lay the country of Burma.

George and I and Barbara were on our way to the Beijing Olympics, and George

had wanted to make one last visit to South Korea and then to Thailand before we arrived

in China. If we were going to Thailand, the two places I wanted to go were the Mae La

Refugee Camp and the Mae Tao Clinic. Barbara was eager to join me.

The summer air was wet and humid, and people were waiting impatiently for the

onslaught of the rainy season. My clothes stuck to my skin almost from the moment I

stepped off the plane. A large welcoming party was waiting for us on the tarmac, the

governor of Thailand's Tak Province, the deputy governor, the chief judge, the Mae Sot

district officer, the commander of the provincial police, the mayor, the chairman of the

municipal council, the U.S. consul general, and sixty schoolchildren waving flags. From

there we departed for the Burmese border.

The Mae Tao Clinic is the place Dr. Cynthia Maung calls home. She is a Burmese

doctor who fled into Thailand in 1988, when she was twenty-nine years old. She was

running from chaos; in the cities, Burmese troops knelt and fired repeatedly on unarmed

demonstrators protesting the repressive junta. To silence some of the protesters, the

regime's forces rounded them up and drowned them. Dr. Cynthia escaped by walking

through the jungles at night. When the sun rose, she slept in fields. She crossed the border

at Mae Sot and began life in a refugee camp. Soon she was setting up a primitive medical

clinic to treat refugees who arrived with war wounds or who had contracted malaria. She

sterilized her instruments by boiling them in an aluminum rice cooker and thought she

would return home in two, possibly three months. Twenty years later, she has made only

brief forays across the jungle-laced border to care for the sick in Burma. She remains in

Thailand, at her clinic, where she is known as the Mother Teresa of the Burmese.

I had already "met" Dr. Cynthia via a White House teleconference on Burma, but

now I had the chance to talk to her face-to-face and to shake her hand. I walked into her

open-air clinic, and the first thing I saw was a volunteer American doctor performing

cataract surgery in a building with open windows. Outside the rains of a tropical

thunderstorm poured down, turning the paths to mud. In another section was a row of

picnic tables covered with plastic shields. That was where they placed the newborns.

They weighed the babies on a vegetable scale, laying each on a paper napkin. The clinic

also fits prosthetics--legs, arms, feet--for all the people who lost limbs to the many land

mines planted by the military junta. Refugees are being trained to make the prosthetic

molds and casts, for which there is near-constant demand. Fifty thousand Burmese also

cross the border each year to visit Mae Tao to seek medical care. Many walk hundreds of

miles from deep inside Burma to the clinic. I left behind crates of donated supplies,

including thousands of bed nets to help prevent malaria, which is rampant in the region.

Thirty miles away, pushed up against the sides of steep, forested mountains, their

tops obscured by drifting clouds and rain, is the Mae La Refugee Camp. The sprawling

camp winds its way around six hills at the Thai-Burma border. Today children who were

born in Mae La two decades ago are having children of their own. None of them has ever

set foot outside Mae La's compound of muddy paths and hutlike homes. Thai law

requires them to remain confined to their camps in a stateless limbo. More than 140,000

Burmese refugees live in camps like this strung along the Thai-Burma border, nearly

40,000 in Mae La alone, at least according to official estimates. The actual totals may be

much higher. Beyond the camps, as many as 1.5 million other Burmese live inside

Thailand.

At Mae La there are now twenty-six schools, built from weathered bamboo, with

open sides and topped by thatched roofs. What few desks and chairs they had rested on

damp, earthen floors. At the school I visited, two young American women were helping

to teach English. One of the boys stood and wrote a slightly halting message to me on the

blackboard, "My life in refugee is better than Burma, but I don't have opportunity to out

outside the camp. I would like to speak English, so I am now trying hard." They lived in a

camp without jobs, where there is no electricity and no running water, yet they came to

learn and dreamed of a better life. A few would get that chance.

In 2005 the U.S. Congress changed the immigration requirements for Burmese

refugees. By the time of my visit, over twenty thousand Burmese had been cleared to

resettle in the United States. Three families were preparing to board a bus for the first

stage of their trip when I arrived at Mae La. One family was going to Florida; another

was headed to South Carolina; and a third was leaving for Texas. Their belongings were

packed into brightly colored rice sacks.

At Mae La, I was greeted by teenagers performing a traditional Burmese dance. It

was a dance from a land over the mountains, a land they had never seen from outside

their bamboo walls. The next day, August 8, 2008, would mark twenty years since the

brutal government crackdown that drove so many Burmese to run for their lives into

Thailand.

That is part of what is ultimately so tragic about these repressive regimes, in

Burma, in Afghanistan, in Liberia. They go on for years, in some cases, like Burma, for

generations. Whole generations pass, and the culture erodes. Under the junta, half the

people in Burma suffer from malnutrition and hunger. And when these regimes finally do

collapse, everything has to be rebuilt. There is no infrastructure for people to even begin

to start over, no economic infrastructure, no civil infrastructure, no physical

infrastructure, no power lines or good roads. It takes years to rebuild.

It was almost surreal to leave the refugee camp and arrive that night in Beijing,

China, which had spent years preparing for a grand Summer Olympics. In a speech in

Bangkok, George had called on the Chinese to cease detaining political dissidents, human

rights activists, and religious activists. He spoke out in support of a free press, freedom of

assembly, and labor rights, saying, "The United States believes the people of China

deserve the fundamental liberty that is the natural right of all human beings. . . . Trusting

its people with greater freedom is the only way for China to develop its full potential."

China was consumed with its global spectacle. And we relished every minute of

watching our amazing athletes compete on the world stage. We waved flags and cheered,

moving from the Olympic swimming pool to the basketball stadium to the imported sand

court for beach volleyball. It was a stunning sight to see the Chinese cheering for the

American basketball players, chanting "Kobe, Kobe" for Kobe Bryant. And we were

equally proud when our basketball team lined the seats of the Olympic pool to shout as

Michael Phelps won his string of gold medals. The men's team came and cheered at the

women's games. It was a genuine display of camaraderie and sportsmanship.

I was particularly touched by one event, the men's 400-meter freestyle in the

Olympic pool. Michael Phelps won the gold, while fellow American swimmer Larsen

Jensen won the bronze. After the ceremony, all three medalists made a celebratory walk

around the pool, and George and I waited at the rail to greet them. As he took his first

steps, Michael Phelps tossed his bouquet of red roses into the crowd, and the silver

medalist soon did the same. But Larsen Jensen held on to his. When he reached me, he

lifted his arm to hand me his flowers, saying, "I want you to have these."

Gampy joined us, remembering the days thirty years before when he had been the

United States' official diplomat to China after President Nixon reestablished relations.

President Hu Jintao had us to lunch in the Forbidden City, the centuries-old compound of

the emperors, tucked behind massive red walls. There were small meandering streams

and gardens, but the ancient rooms are now largely bare, leaving their past to our

imaginations.

As September opened, we expected a harsh presidential campaign but an

otherwise calm fall. Within two weeks our assumptions had been thoroughly dashed.

George's presidency would be bookended by two Septembers, the September of 9-11,

when the nation was devastated by forces without, and the September of 2008, when it

was threatened with collapse from within.

My own experience with economic collapse came from the fierce boom and bust

oil cycles in Midland. Each time, people were lulled into believing that the boom would

last, and each time, the oil markets collapsed with the slimmest of warnings. Economics

was not part of my portfolio in the White House, but along the dusty streets of Midland I

had known highly educated geologists who lost their jobs and families who left town

because when the well drilling ceased and the derricks were shut down, there was nothing

left for them. But the crisis we now faced was engulfing not one Texas town but vast

swaths of the nation. Week after week the White House was working around the clock to

manage the financial crisis. Some staffers barely left their desks. George's term began just

after the dot-com bubble had burst, plunging the nation into recession. In his final

months, he was working to contain another bursting bubble as it direly threatened the

entire U.S. economy.

In the news and on the presidential campaign trail, George was attacked

ruthlessly. We had both long ago given up stewing over the things said about either one

of us. When you are president, there simply isn't time. George did not have time to be

mad at a press person who wrote or said something nasty about him. He did not have time

to be upset at a candidate who lashed out at him in an effort to secure higher office. Then

too, as we had long ago learned, there is a certain luxury that comes from being a

candidate. It is easy to criticize a sitting president when you are not the one in the Oval

Office, when you are not responsible for the decisions that must be made and for the

whole of the nation. I thought of that when I heard the daily rants from the campaign

trail. It got so that even the weather seemed to be George's fault. And I wondered if

Barack Obama, who spent far more time attacking George than he did his opponent, John

McCain, would want to amend his words once he discovered the reality of the White

House and was himself confronted by the challenges and crises that hit a president every

day, all day.

There is also a larger picture to consider. No one, not even a president, is going to

make the right decision every time. Presidents may have more information on which to

base their decisions, but they do not have the benefit of hindsight. They must be prepared

to take risks for what they believe is right. And they must try to anticipate the future, not

just two years or four years out but what the consequences will be decades ahead.

George believes, and I believe as well, that the presidency is larger than the men

who are in it. The Founding Fathers, who in the spring of 1787 wrestled with this issue,

designed it that way. Each president's responsibility is to the office, the sole national

institution that speaks for all Americans, regardless of their party or class or home or age.

George always believed that it was his responsibility to treat the office with great care.

Presidents are not always right, but history tells us that our core values are right

and that our country is good. Those are the values that guided George, the touchstone by

which he measured what he did. George knew that in the heat of the moment, presidents

tend to get much of the blame and little of the credit. Not all of his decisions would be

popular, but as a nation, we would not want our presidents to make decisions solely on

the basis of their personal popularity, or poll numbers, or daily headlines. The challenges

we face are too great for that.

I am proud that, as president, George acted on principle, that he put our country

first and himself last.

Just as the financial crisis was roiling America, the surge in Iraq was cementing

some of its largest gains. Iraq, which had once been cited as a failure, was becoming a far

less violent, far more peaceful and stable place. It was not perfect, but it had an

opportunity to build a better, healthier society, and perhaps in time, ten or twenty-five

years from now, it would help transform the Middle East into a more peaceful region.

The loneliest of George's decisions, the surge had been the right choice. But ironically,

drowned out by the din of a political campaign, Iraq's success was pushed out of the

headlines, if it was mentioned at all.

I never visited Iraq, one of my genuine regrets from my time in the White House.

I did spend several years working on a project to open a children's hospital in Basra; Iraqi

children have one of the highest incidences of pediatric leukemia in the world, likely

caused in part by Saddam Hussein's use of chemical weapons, and their need for care was

great. But the location chosen for the hospital was for years a high security risk. There

were lengthy delays, and when I left the White House, the state-of-the-art facility had still

not opened. There are, however, many moments at which I could look back with pleasure

and a bit of pride. I had worked to support better education and women's rights and

human rights around the globe, and I had worked to better people's lives here at home. I

had reached out to victims of oppression in Burma and to tattooed American teens

struggling to break free from the cycle of gang violence. I had sat on mud floors in

African health clinics and inside Bedouin-style tents for breast cancer survivors. I had

visited seventy-five countries, including five trips across Africa and three to Afghanistan.

I had been to many of the countries hardest hit by AIDS and malaria. I had held the hands

of the dying and looked into the eyes of children who had been orphaned in the most

hideous ways, as well as children who were raising other children younger than

themselves. Yet amid heartbreak and horror, I had seen individual miracles. I saw how

medicines or simple bed nets were giving millions of people a new lease on life. I had

met Burmese who were still able to dream of freedom, and Afghan women who were

proud to earn an education. I had seen the worst of man in the 9-11 attacks and the worst

of nature in Katrina. But I had also seen the very best of America in the hundreds of

thousands of people who had put their lives on hold to help the victims and to help our

country rebuild. I witnessed the compassion of strangers comforting, clothing, and

feeding those in need. I had seen young men and women abandoned by their parents

choose to raise their own children in love. I had been blessed to meet and to know many

of the bravest men and women the world has ever seen, our soldiers, Marines, airmen,

sailors, and Coast Guard men and women.

At home and abroad, I was inspired by stories of resilience. I could think of Doris

Voitier in St. Bernard Parish, who was determined to keep her promise of an open school

for her students after the ravishes of Katrina, or of Habiba Sarabi in Bamiyan,

Afghanistan. I could think of military families whose grandfathers, fathers, and now

daughters and sons wore our nation's uniform. My greatest keepsakes and treasures from

the White House are the people, the ordinary yet so very extraordinary people I met, day

after day, week after week.

Inside the White House, I had helped restore five historic rooms and refurbish

over twenty-five rooms in the residence for future families. At Camp David I had worked

on redecorating the cabins with privately raised funds; many of the buildings were now

more than half a century old. Foreign leaders had been staying in a cabin where the front

hall looked directly into the bathroom. It was a pleasure to make them comfortable. We

gathered a historical archive of photos capturing famous visits to Camp David so that

every president from FDR forward and numerous foreign leaders are remembered and

recognized. I helped to renovate the James S. Brady Press Briefing Room, which had last

been modernized in 1981. Every seat now has Internet access and energy-efficient

lighting. I worked on updating the Cabinet and Roosevelt rooms in the West Wing. In the

White House, George and I had hosted over fifteen hundred social events; many were to

award medals or honor accomplishments or great moments in American arts and

literature. With Jim Billington I had started the National Book Festival, which now draws

some 120,000 visitors each fall, and I had worked to combat illiteracy worldwide. I had

done what I had hoped to do: I had worked to be a good steward of the White House for

our nation. Every day, even the difficult ones, had been a privilege.

In October of 2008, I was finally able to travel to the Laura Ingalls Wilder house

in Mansfield, Missouri, where she and her husband had settled on Rocky Ridge Farm.

I had long wanted to visit the last home of the woman whose Little House on the

Prairie stories I had grown up with and had spent hours reading to my own daughters.

From the Laura of those books and her family, I relearned the lessons that no matter how

impoverished the lives of those on our frontiers, they were rich in character and strength

and love. I proudly presented the home and museum with a certificate from the National

Trust for Historic Preservation designating it an official project of Save America's

Treasures. One of the great treats I had as first lady was the chance to visit the homes of

some of my favorite authors--Mark Twain's residence in Hartford, Connecticut; Carl

Sandburg's home, Connemara, in Flat Rock, North Carolina; and Edith Wharton's Lenox,

Massachusetts, home, the Mount. In the case of the Mount, preservation work has been

vital to save it from closure and decay. Today it is a thriving place, honoring one of

America's best female writers.

In November, as the banking system began to stabilize after its near collapse,

George hosted a world economic summit, where there were so many foreign leaders that

the White House had to place the translators in a tent on the roof of the East Wing, with

wires running through the bottom of the residence and up into the State Dining Room, so

everyone could hear what was being said simultaneously. Thirteen languages were

spoken at the dinner, and the arrivals alone took close to an hour, because each head of

state had to arrive and receive the same recognition of protocol.

December brought the renewed joys of Christmas. I chose a red, white, and blue

theme to honor our country during this election year. We recycled many of the

decorations from previous seasons, turning old towering Nutcracker statues into flagwaving Uncle Sams; even Santa wore red, white, and blue. We sent ornaments to every

member of Congress and asked each representative to select a local artist to decorate

them. Three hundred and sixty-nine returned, decorated with paint, fabric, beading, and

images of our varied regions.

Mother came for that last Christmas, and as she had done in previous years, she

pulled a chair to the very top of the residence stairs and listened to the beautiful sounds of

the carolers and bell ringers as their voices and music rose and echoed off the marble

below. Each year, aside from the formal parties, we opened the White House on

December afternoons and weekends to members of Congress and their guests and every

person on the White House staff; we did the same for hundreds more across the

government. They were invited to tour the house with family and friends, and we asked

choirs and orchestras and carolers from around the nation to perform as the guests walked

among the decorations, the garlands, and the trees. Those were the sounds that Mother so

loved.

But it was too much for her to spend Christmas Day with us at Camp David. The

prospect of getting her from the cabin to the lodge in the cold and ice was too daunting.

With a knot of regret, I let her return home to Midland. But we did have our girls and the

entire Bush family--George's parents, his siblings, their spouses and children. It would be

our last gathering at Camp David, "Camp" as we called it, the place where George's

sister, Doro, had married Bobby Koch at the end of Gampy's term. When he left office,

she had assumed she would never see Camp again. Instead, when George was

inaugurated, Doro was issued a standing invitation to come with us, not just for the

holidays but for any weekend.

It was the season for good-byes. George was busy with departure photos for the

staff. But he insisted upon adding something else. He invited everyone who worked at the

White House--the butlers, the painters, the ushers, the telephone operators, the

secretaries, every White House employee--to come to the Oval Office for a photo. And

they came, these wonderful people who had been such an important part of our lives for

the past eight years. Some had worked at the White House for four decades but had never

before been invited into the Oval Office. They entered with tears in their eyes.

We would also be leaving not just close staff but true friends. George's second

chief of staff, Josh Bolten, had been a steadfast guiding presence during the difficult

months of the Iraq surge and through the economic crisis. He had been with George since

1999, the earliest days of his presidential run. Josh is a fine person, with a wonderful

sense of humor and a great and versatile mind. We had treasured his company, and that of

his longtime girlfriend, Dede McClure, on our Camp David weekends.

My own staff had a special place in my heart. I remained very close with Andi

Ball, my first chief of staff. My second, Anita McBride, had become a confidante and a

cherished friend. She and my other staff members had been instrumental in so many

accomplishments. Our lives were interwoven far beyond the walls of the office, and it

was with real sadness that we watched as this period of shared days came to an end.

Long before the November election, George was determined to make the

transition to the new president the most seamless in history. He created a Transition

Coordinating Council, to ensure that "each office was left in better shape than when our

administration had arrived." It was part of George's interest in the continuity of

government, and it was also because we knew how vital a smooth transition is,

particularly given the ever-present threat of terrorism and the challenges to the economy.

He believed that one of the paramount responsibilities of the president is to do all that he

or she can for the next occupant of the Oval Office. Every White House department was

instructed to prepare detailed briefing binders for its successors. In my office, the projects

team left behind detailed lists of all their contacts at federal agencies, as well as timelines

for events and even for producing the White House Christmas card. The correspondence

shop left binders filled with sample letters, and we left scheduling information as well.

And that practice was repeated across all parts of the administration. The Social Office

gathered hundreds of pages of instructions, timelines, and sample invitations to leave

behind detailed information for their successors. The same was done for Homeland

Security, national security, economic policy, commerce and trade, everywhere that there

would be a new team. Because this was also the first presidential transition during a

period when the nation was under terrorist threat, the White House held a full Homeland

Security exercise, a mock attack on major city subways, bringing together the outgoing

and incoming administrations, including National Security Advisor Steve Hadley and his

successor, General James Jones, and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and

his successor, Arizona governor Janet Napolitano, as well as Fran Townsend, the longserving assistant to the president for Homeland Security and counterterrorism, so that

there would be full continuity for the government and for the American people.

Barack and Michelle Obama came to visit the White House, and while George

and the president-elect met in the Oval Office, I gave the next first lady a tour. Upstairs I

showed her the dressing room window, with its view across the Rose Garden and into the

West Wing, and told her the story of my mother-in-law first pointing it out to Hillary

Clinton sixteen years before. I also invited her to come back with her daughters and her

mother. She did, in December, and Jenna and Barbara came to show the girls the parts of

the house that they had always found the most fun.

As in so many years past, Inauguration Day 2009 was cold. It was also historic, as

the nation swore in its first African-American president.

After the inaugural ceremony, we made our last walk down the steps of the

Capitol with the Obamas; inside Marine One, Bar and Gampy were waiting, so that they

could join us for the final helicopter ride to Andrews Air Force Base, where nearly one

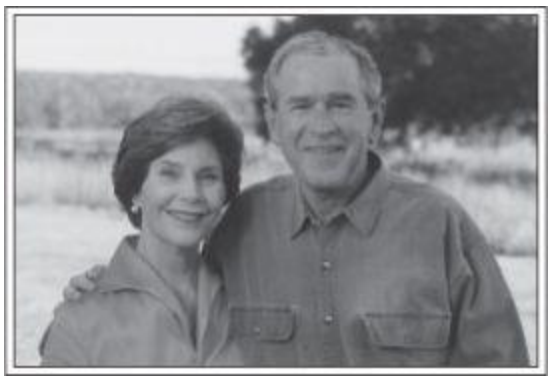
thousand of our staff and friends were waiting to bid us a fond farewell.

The love of the Bush family had come full circle; the pride George had felt for his

parents, they felt in return for their son. They too had made this journey we were about to

begin and had found unexpected joys in the years beyond.

As the helicopter rose over the Capitol, George took my hand. We looked at the



city below and out into the vibrant blue January sky, toward home.

Prairie Chapel Mornings

George and me, Crawford, Texas, 2009.

(Photo (c) David Woo)

Late that January afternoon in 2009, we stopped in Midland, where George spoke

to a cheering crowd. We had left from Midland to travel to the White House; it was

fitting that it be our destination on the journey home. Thirty thousand people were

waiting for us on the downtown square. George thanked them for welcoming us. "I am

grateful that you all came out," he said, "and I am thankful that I had the honor of being

president of the U.S. for eight years," noting that we all offer Barack Obama "our prayers

for his success." As the afternoon faded, he said, "The days have been long, but the years

are short," adding, "This guy who went to Sam Houston Elementary spent the night in

Buckingham Palace.

"The presidency," George said, "was a joyous experience, but nothing compares

with Texas at sunset." He paused briefly, then spoke. "It is good to be home." From there

our plane carried us to Waco, where four thousand more of our cheering friends lined the

edges of the runway.

On that plane ride home to Texas were many of the staffers who had served with

us--Josh Bolten, Andy Card, Karl Rove, Karen Hughes, Andi Ball, and Anita McBride-and also our lifelong friends. From Waco we headed to our ranch with a few of our

closest friends. We reached our land, Prairie Chapel Ranch, in the dark. Barbara was with

us; Jenna had to return to Baltimore, Maryland, to teach the next morning. George parked

his mountain bikes in the garage, and we unloaded the luggage. I was struck by the

stillness. There were no staff members, no briefers, no military aides. The grounds were

quiet, except for the rustle of the Texas winter wind, the murmur of our own voices, and

the soft shuffle of our feet on the crushed stone.

The next morning we were up, as we always are, before dawn, and for the first

time in eight years, George made the coffee himself before he brought it into our

bedroom.

Outside, as the day broke, our land was the color of dull wheat, and the prairie

grasses were dry and brown, waving in the wind. The sky, when the sun rose behind the

clouds, was a leaden gray, wrapping snug above us and beautiful in its repose. We could

drive out and see cattle grazing in our pastures, hear the water rushing down in the

canyons. We saw where we wanted to plant blackberry vines and where the bluebonnets

would begin blooming in the spring. We gazed upon the spot where Jenna and Henry

were married; each morning from our kitchen table I can see the warm glow of the

limestone cross where they exchanged their vows.

There are still physical reminders at Prairie Chapel Ranch of our eight years in the

White House: Secret Service watch huts remain scattered around the edges of our house,

and a giant treetop enclosure, a place where sharpshooters once paced, scanning the

perimeter for trouble, stands draped in vines. Someday it might make a wonderful fort for

a grandson or granddaughter.

And there are other reminders. We live behind gates now; our Dallas house has

one at the end of its curving block. Until the gate was installed, carloads of the curious

would wind down our dead-end street, running their tires over our neighbors' lawns, to

get a glimpse of our new home. Bar and Gampy faced the same problem when they

returned to Houston, and the Texas legislature passed a special law allowing gates to be

installed on the residential streets of former presidents. George and I are the secondgeneration beneficiaries.

At home our pace of life has hardly slowed; after the White House, requests and

invitations continue unabated. There are many days when, just as during the presidency,

nearly every minute is accounted for. We live by the block schedule, a 6:00 a.m. flight to

Florida or Pennsylvania, and then on to Minnesota or Indiana. I am asked to give

speeches and to serve on charitable advisory boards, like that of the Salvation Army or of

the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture;

George speaks, works on building his presidential library and institute, and has joined

with Bill Clinton to coordinate a national relief effort for earthquake-ravaged Haiti. There

is much meaning and purpose to be found in a postpresidential life.

I am aware, though, that a completely normal life remains just out of reach. At the

airport with my mother, well-wishers ask for pictures, and I stop to smile underneath the

dangling Hertz Car Rental sign. In restaurants, in passenger terminals, amid the shelves

of a bookstore, strangers approach me like long-lost friends, or rotate their heads to offer

up smiles, second glances, or polite stares. At times I wonder when this curiosity will

fade, when the novelty of our lives will diminish, and George and I will occupy more of

the background.

I wonder too about the passions that seem to be so permanently entrenched in all

sides of American politics, where elected officials become near instantaneous celebrities,

and crowds are expected to swoon as teenagers once did for the Beatles almost half a

century ago. Celebrity is a particularly poor model for politics. At the White House, there

is no off-season hiatus or a director to yell, "Cut, that's a wrap." The demands of not just

the nation but of the world are fierce and unrelenting. I am certain that all presidents have

moments when they simply ask God, "Please do not let anything happen today."

We have lived through four seasons now on our ranchland, a spring bloom of

wildflower carpets and flowering prickly pear; the baking heat of summer, when the air

shimmers and even the cicada whine slows to accommodate the stifling air; a fall of crisp

mornings and brilliant colors; and a winter when at night we can hear the howls of the

coyotes and the rush of biting prairie winds. Four seasons. Hardly enough time to reflect

on eight years, let alone a lifetime. When I was born, there was a blacksmith shop on one

of Midland's main streets; today, our news is disseminated via blogs.

But each morning, when I watch the sun lift itself over our eastern hill, cutting

through the tree line and illuminating the gentle prairie grasses and the two young shade

trees that our White House staff gave to us, I am reminded of the joy to be found in the

day that is coming. George will soon open his presidential library at Southern Methodist

University in Dallas. The George W. Bush Institute is already functioning, and as part of

that, I am pursuing many of the causes that were especially dear to me in the White

House. I am eager to continue to advocate for women's rights and women's health.

Through a special women's initiative, I have begun working on new ways to help the

women of Afghanistan and the Middle East and to promote education and literacy for the

millions to whom alphabets are a mystery and basic addition a complex puzzle. And

through the institute, we will help to promote basic human freedoms for these women and

their families.

But as much as I treasure my public life, I also treasure the quiet of my private

one.

Sometime during that first spring and summer back in Texas, I began to feel the

buoyancy of my own newfound freedom. After nearly eight years of hypervigilance, of

watching for the next danger or tragedy that might be coming, I could at last exhale; I

could simply be. When I raise my eyes to the sky, it is to see the drift of the clouds, the

brightness of the blue, or the moon and the ever-shifting arrangement of the stars.

"Look up, Laura," I can still hear my mother say, with a hint of awe and wonder,

and I do.

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A significant portion of this book centers on the White House, and there I was

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A note as well for future researchers: significant parts of the overall presidential

timeline from 9-11 and a few parts of the timeline from Katrina are incomplete. The 9-11

Commission cited in its final report its concerns with record keeping for the location of

the president and other key government officials on that day, and in fact some time logs

kept that day have up to a one-hour discrepancy. In addition, human memory is faulty.

Senator Ted Kennedy, Senator Judd Gregg, and I all independently recalled spending

hours together at the U.S. Senate that morning. In fact, the entire time was about one hour

or slightly less, according to the best estimates of the reconstructed official logs.

George's presidency was also the first electronic presidency, meaning that its

documents were all electronically archived, but in some cases, during my travels, I added

unscheduled stops that were not always noted on the original logs. Where there are

differences with the official trip logs, this book should be considered as the definitive

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Bill, 78Zonne, Bob, 78Zuckerman, Barry, 375Zuschlag, Richard, 341

Me, about age three, in front of one of the houses that Daddy built on Estes

Avenue.

My mother, Jenna Louise Hawkins, age ten, in Canutillo, Texas, near El Paso.

My father's first photo, taken in 1913, when he was nearly one. With him are his

brother, Mark; father, Mark Anthony Welch; and mother, Mary Lula Lane Welch.

My mother and her mother, Jessie Laura Sherrard, dressed up to visit El Paso.

My mother with her future husband, Harold Welch, and her father, Hal Hawkins.

The photo of my mother that my father carried across Europe during World War

II.

My father's photos from the Nazi death camp at Nordhausen, which his unit

helped liberate in 1945. American GIs found five thousand bodies; survivors often lay

beside the dead. For years we kept these photos in a cigar box. My father never wanted to

speak about Nordhausen.

My parents' wedding photo. Daddy said the war caused him to lose his hair.

Mother holding me.

Me on Grandma Welch's lap. She was a sturdy woman with heavy, lace-up shoes.

Reading

with

mother.

Our house on Princeton Avenue.

Me, about age twelve.

My high school graduation photo, age seventeen. Born in November, I was

always the youngest in my class.

With my father and Marty the dog by the Christmas tree when I was a teacher in

Houston.

George and me with his parents on our wedding day. We had a small Saturdaymorning wedding. (Frank Miller)

Having Jenna and Barbara was the answer to our prayers.

My father with the girls.

Reading

'Twas the Night Before Christmas in 1985.

Bar Bush casts a wary eye on Jenna during a 1984 Reagan-Bush rally in Midland.

(White House photo)

The 1988 White House Easter Egg Roll. (White House photo)

Trick-or-treating on Gampy's 1988 campaign plane. George and I made Jenna's

costume. (White House photo)

Reading with the girls in Dallas. When they were born, George and I loved that

we each had a baby to hold. (Photo (c) Barbara Laing)

George H. W. Bush tears up as George W. Bush becomes Governor of Texas in

1995.

Election night 2000. Loading the dishwasher in our kitchen as we wait.

Walking in the 2001 inaugural parade. (Eric Draper/White House photo)

Dressed for the inaugural balls. George, who wakes at 5:00 A.M., HAD US

HOME BEFORE MIDNIGHT. (PAUL MORSE/WHITE HOUSE PHOTO)

Lighting the candles for our first state dinner with President Vicente Fox of

Mexico, September 5, 2001. (Eric Draper/White House photo)

Welcoming book lovers to the first National Book Festival on September 8, 2001.

I launched the festival with Jim Billington, the Librarian of Congress. (Moreen

Ishikawa/White House photo)

With senators Ted Kennedy and Judd Gregg on September 11, 2001, in Senator

Kennedy's office. I was on Capitol Hill to brief the Senate Education Committee.

(Moreen Ishikawa/ White House photo)

Speaking to the press on 9-11. (White House photo)

In the Presidential Emergency Operations Center below the White House,

listening to George after his return from Florida on 9-11. (Eric Draper/White House

photo)

Laying flowers with New York's first lady Libby Pataki in tribute to fallen New

York City firefighters outside of Engine Company 54 and Ladder Company 4 in lower

Manhattan. (Moreen Ishikawa/White House photo)

Guest teaching in Newark, New Jersey, October 2001. The girl on my lap

whispered to me, "Did you hear about the buildings?" (Moreen Ishikawa/White House

photo)

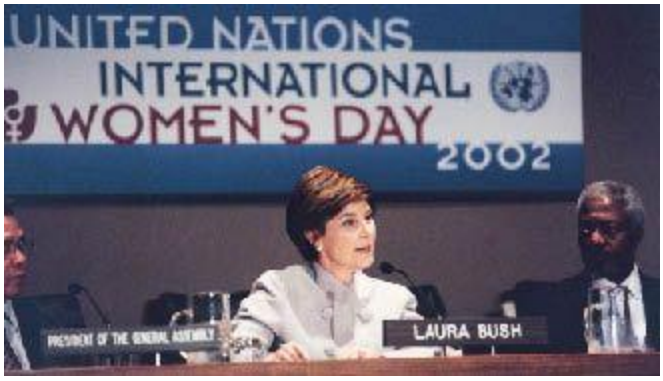
Breakfast at our dining room table with Vladimir Putin and Lyudmila Putina

during their November 2001 visit to our ranch in Texas. (Eric Draper/ White House

photo)

Lighting the Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center with Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and

Al Roker and Ann Curry of NBC News. (Susan Sterner/ White House photo)



Representing the United States at the United Nations for International Women's

Day in March 2002, alongside UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. (Susan Sterner/White

House photo)

Flying with Jenna from Paris to Prague. I love traveling with my daughters and

seeing destinations through their eyes. (Susan Sterner/White House photo)

A service of remembrance at St. John's Church to mark the first anniversary of 911. (Eric Draper/White House photo)

Leaving the Diplomatic Reception Room after saying good night to the Czech

president Vaclav Havel and his wife, Dagmar, in 2002. (Paul Morse/White House photo)

Greeting female teachers from Afghanistan. I admired their bravery after years of

oppression, and I longed to make my own visit to their nation. (Susan Sterner/White

House photo)

Laying a rose at Auschwitz, the infamous Nazi death camp in 2003. (White House

photo)

Standing in the Door of No Return on Goree Island, Senegal, a monument to

remember the hideous Atlantic slave trade. (Tina Hager/White House photo)

Visiting the wounded at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. George and I often

went together to visit the wounded or those who had lost loved ones. I always knew when

he had gone alone. A special grief shone in his eyes. Here, with Staff Sergeant Chester

Duncan. (White House photo)

With Specialist Aaron Bugg in November of 2004. (White House photo)

Sharing a laugh at the 2005 Black Tie & Boots Inaugural Ball. (Eric Draper/White

House photo)

George taking the oath of office, administered by Chief Justice William

Rehnquist. (Susan Sterner/White House photo)

The official 2005 inaugural family portrait, which my mother missed. Everyone

pictured is part of the extended Bush family. (Eric Draper/White House photo)

Meeting with Afghan president Hamid Karzai at the Presidential Palace. (Susan

Sterner/ White House photo)

Holding up a kaleidoscope for an Afghan child on the streets of Kabul in March

of 2005. (Susan Sterner/ White House photo)

On board a U.S. military helicopter in the skies over Kabul, Afghanistan. (Susan

Sterner/White House photo)

Dinner with U.S. troops and commanders at the Dragon Chow Dining Hall at

Bagram Air Base. (Susan Sterner/White House photo)

A visit to Homeboy Industries, which works with twelve thousand young people

from L.A. gangs each year. (Krisanne Johnson/ White House photo)

At a Rwanda church, Jenna and I hold feverish HIV-infected children on our laps.

(Krisanne Johnson/ White House photo)

With Jenna, Cherie Blair, and Jeannette Kagame at a memorial for the victims of

Rwanda's genocide. (Krisanne Johnson/ White House photo)

Serving meals to victims of Hurricane Katrina in Lafayette, Louisiana. (Krisanne

Johnson/White House photo)

Listening to the stories of families who had escaped the storm. (Krisanne

Johnson/White House photo)

Building a new home in Louisiana. By August 2008, the New Orleans metro area

had reached 87 percent of its original population. (Eric Draper/White House photo)

Hugging a child in Mississippi. In many towns, there were only piles of debris.

(Krisanne Johnson/White House photo)

The reopening of Delisle Elementary School in Pass Christian, Mississippi,

October 2005. (Eric Draper/ White House photo)

Thanking our troops at Bagram Air Base in Kabul in March of 2006. (Eric Draper/White House photo)

HIV-positive mothers from South Africa's Mothers2Mothers program visit me in

the White House. (Kimberlee Hewitt/ White House photo)

The wonderful pomp and circumstance of a state dinner for Queen Elizabeth II

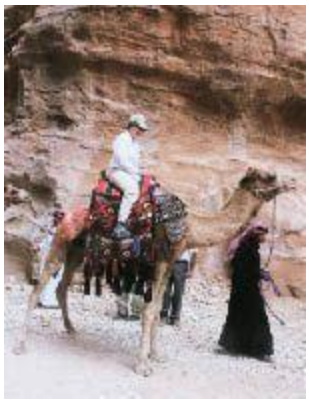
and Prince Philip, April 2007. (Joyce Boghosian/White House photo)

Our annual National Park hike in New England, with Jane Ann, Marge, Peggy,

me, and Regan. Those unhurried days of friendship renewed me, body and soul. (Peggy

Weiss)

With the Dalai Lama in the White House residence. (Eric Draper/White House



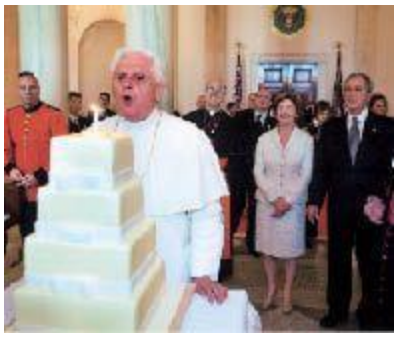


photo)

Meeting with breast cancer survivors in the Pink Majlis, the Pink Tent, in Abu

Dhabi, October 2007. (Shealah Craighead/White House photo)

Riding a camel through the ancient Jordanian city of Petra. (Shealah

Craighead/White House photo)

Pope Benedict XVI came to visit us at the White House on his birthday, and we

surprised him with a cake, April 2008. (David Bohrer/White House photo)

A bird's-eye view of the annual Congressional Picnic. (Grant Miller/White House

photo)

Jenna married Henry Hager, whom she met during George's 2004 campaign, at

dusk by the little lake on our ranch. (Paul Morse)

En route to the Mae La Burmese refugee camp with Barbara in an Air Force cargo

transport plane in August of 2008. (Shealah Craighead/ White House photo)

Showing a Burmese family their first digital photo. (Shealah Craighead/ White

House photo)

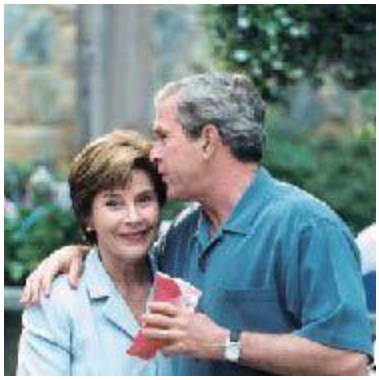
A Burmese boy writes a message to me on a blackboard in his classroom: "My

life in refugee is better than Burma, but I don't have opportunity to out outside." (Shealah

Craighead/White House photo)

Cheering on our athletes at the 2008 Summer Olympics. (Eric Draper/White

House photo)



A private moment with George. We are anchored to each other. (Paul Morse/White House photo)

Home to Texas, January 2009. (Eric Draper/White House photo)

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